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Ordinary Witnesses

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Ordinary Witnesses

by

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Ordinary Witnesses

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"Ordinary Witnesses" takes up and extends Toni Morrison's call to recognize the unspoken, but "seething presence" of America's historical traumas in some of the American canon's most venerated works. Beyond its explorations of trauma in three deeply resonant works of contemporary American literature, it shows how trauma provides a critical lens through which we may begin to read and teach across the multiple literatures of the United States without collapsing their specific histories. Rather than simply "applying" trauma theory to literature, "Ordinary Witnesses" makes explicit the rich implicit work on American trauma already present in its literature. In doing so, this project reframes debates about the practice of canonization. For example, while its primary texts might normally be read within separate canons of Native American literature, African American literature, Southern literature, or lesbian literature, here they are complimentary pieces of an ongoing national debate about the nature of America's story, a debate that is deeply inflected by trauma's long term effects. Chapter One traces Dorothy

Allison's strategies, as reflected in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, for rewriting a contemporary political narrative of child abuse that relegates class oppression to the background. Chapter Two examines how Sherman Alexie's novels and short stories, particularly *Reservation Blues*, intervene in a genocidal myth of the disappearing Indian that makes its survivors invisible. Chapter Three explores why, in *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, legal scholar Patricia Williams turns to literary strategies to show the everyday effects of a social contract based on slavery. The fourth and final chapter brings these literary lessons to the classroom, in order to argue for a pedagogy of witness based on learning's repetitive remembering and forgetting, rather than the oft-employed rhetoric of crisis and conversion.

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Introduction

'My memory stammers': Trauma, Witness, and Literary Evidence

The evidence of things not seen

In 1982, James Baldwin was living in Paris, France, in voluntary half-exile from the United States having fled in 1948, he writes, because he was not sure he could survive being black in America. He came back to the U.S. at the request of *Playboy Magazine* to report on the twenty-six missing and—it soon evolved—murdered black children of Georgia whose bodies had surfaced along the sides of the roads running through Atlanta. In the opening pages of his brief preface to the resulting book, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, Baldwin produced a curious and moving meditation on nationalism, memory, terror, and the effort to bear witness.[1] Like many of the texts I will read in this project, though Baldwin's essay never employs the word *trauma*, his description of how terror makes its mark on human consciousness both resonates deeply with trauma, as it has traditionally been defined by clinicians and theorists, and raises significant challenges to this definition.

When he reads the story of the missing children in the French papers, Baldwin imagines he can see a pattern, a familiar outline to the story. It is the terrible familiarity of home:

> …what I remembered —or imagined myself to remember —of my life in America (before I left home!) was terror. And what I am trying to suggest by what *one imagines oneself to be able to remember* is that terror cannot be remembered. One blots it out. The organism — the human being blots it out. One invents, or creates, a personality or a *persona*. Beneath this accumulation

> (rock of ages!) sleeps or hopes to sleep, that terror which the memory repudiates. (xi, italics in the original)

Baldwin's description of terror's impact and "the organism's" attempt —not always successful — to "blot it out" overlaps almost exactly with the clinical descriptions of trauma's impact. In most of these, trauma is figured as a shock, or a wound in the victim's world view or psyche. It's an event that overwhelms thought, feeling, and sense at the time it is happening, and goes "underground" (into the unconscious, if you believe in it, or into certain cordoned off parts of the psyche or the brain) to become a tyrannical absence that haunts the survivor, interrupting sleep and life with dreams and the waking somatic symptoms of "flashbacks," which include both signs of fear such as trembling, sweating, increased heart rate and rapid breathing, and intense bodily hallucinations that mimic fragments of the body's original traumatic experience.[2] Baldwin's description of the "personality or persona" under which "terror sleeps or hopes to sleep" chimes equally well with the clinical vocabulary of repression, disassociation, and "splitting," all of which speak to the ways in which the trauma survivor continues to experience trauma to varying degrees (consciously, unconsciously, through somatic or psychic distress, through habit or behavior) while passing as "normal" —or as simply belonging to the daily world, or even, in some cases, as alive.

Though these rough equivalencies are striking, there is one equally striking difference. The terror that Baldwin speaks of is not an attack from the outside, not an exceptional circumstance, nor even an identifiable shock. Instead, it is a terror that is inseparable from home, from daily life, from the particular nation in which that life took place: It is the terror of Baldwin's "life in America" that he imagines he remembers

("before I left home!") while reading the French interpretation of murders in Georgia. And it is through this imagined/absent memory of that personal and national terror that Baldwin both seeks connection with and explains his compulsion to follow the story of the missing black children.

The terror Baldwin finds as familiar as childhood is not a fear of death, or near-death, the way trauma is often characterized. Instead, it is a story of disappearing, a terror that moves away from the universalism of psychoanalytic categories to resonate with both Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the disappeared victims of state terror in Argentina and elsewhere:

> *Sometimes I think,* one child in Atlanta said to me, *that I'll be coming home from* (baseball or football) *practice and somebody's car will come behind me and I'll be thrown into the trunk of the car and it will be dark and he'll drive the car away and I'll never be found again.*
>
> *Never be found again:* that terror is far more vivid than the fear of death. When the child said that to me I tried to imagine the tom-tom silence of the trunk of the car, the darkness, the silence, the speed, the corkscrew road. I tried, that is, to imagine this as something happening to the child. My memory refused to accommodate that child as myself.
>
> But that child *was* myself. (xii, italics in the original)

But that child was *myself*. What can Baldwin mean by this? It isn't simple identification. When Baldwin tries to imagine himself as the child he fails. Or rather, his *memory* fails: *my memory refused to accommodate that child as myself.* But he knows, too, that though the child stands before him, Atlanta —America —has proved itself more than capable of making children, especially poor, black children, disappear. The child himself, caught in the terror of disappearing one day on the way home, lives what others cannot remember, lives what he himself will one day (if he survives, if he does not disappear) be unable to

remember. It is by trauma's paradoxical logic that, through the refusal of his own memory to admit to feeling the terror of that imminent disappearance, Baldwin feels sure he has felt the terror for himself. When he says, *that child* was *myself* he asks us to wonder where his childhood ends and the child's begins, when they share a national history that still haunts him in exile.

"What," Baldwin asks, "has this to do with the murdered, missing children of Atlanta?"

> It has something to do with the fact that no one wishes to be plunged, head down, into the torrent of what he does not remember and does not wish to remember. It has something to do with the fact that we all came here as candidates for the slaughter of the innocents. It has something to do with the fact that all survivors, however they accommodate or fail to remember it, bear the inexorable guilt of the survivor. It has something to do, in my own case, with having once been a Black child in a White country.
>
> My memory stammers: but my soul is a witness. (xiii)

Baldwin's move towards complex identification —*that child was myself*—most strikingly does *not* result in facile, perfect understanding (I understand perfectly! That very thing has happened to me!). Instead, it leaves him still struggling with avoidance, with guilt, against an inexorable, mysterious connection marked by the repetition of "it has something to do with…." It's a connection that is, finally, not universal, but as idiosyncratic as the memories that we bear, and the jokes we tell. It has something to do —not just in Baldwin's case —with race, and nationality, and the ordinary, terrifying days of childhood and beyond. And it has something to do with a knowing that goes beyond the ordinary bounds of memory, to a history —a history of terror — that does not trudge forward, up, and onward, but instead accumulates and reappears before him, now in a story he reads in the newspaper, now in a story told to him by a child.

It has something to do, as well, with *the evidence of things not seen*, a title which is both a definition of faith[3] and a reference to the (failed) legal evidence of the trial, the murdered bodies of the children, and to Baldwin's own essay. Baldwin has, after all, come to the trial at least nominally as a reporter. As such, he is supposed to report the who, the what, the where and so on, establishing the truth about what happened. But as we will see throughout this project, *the truth about what happened* is always at a premium where trauma is concerned, obscured by the iconic, fragmented nature of traumatic memory itself, by the defensive measures we take to avoid *being plunged, head down, into the torrent* of what we do not wish to remember, or even think we have had the chance to forget, and by the high stakes —emotional, political, economic, legal, historical —that trauma stories so often point toward.

This dissertation tracks the struggles over who will tell what trauma story in three cases where national and individual trauma stories come together in ways that are not always immediately clear, but that always have something to do with the long term effects of historical trauma and its connections to individual trauma and contemporary everyday life: the story of sexual abuse, national politics and feminism told through and around Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*; Sherman Alexie's seriously comic battles against the myth of the disappearing Indian; and Patricia Williams' struggle to bear witness to the traumatic absences described by contract law. I have begun with this extended reading of Baldwin as a way of simultaneously introducing the issues of trauma, testimony, and witness at stake in this project, while highlighting, as I will throughout this dissertation, the theoretical work my literary texts perform, and will continue to

perform, whether or not our critical vocabularies make it possible to describe what they show us.

Literature is one of the best ways to produce testimony that allows us to see the thousand daily pieces of evidence that let us know how trauma structures our daily lives and laws, and how this can be something that we know and react to, but work hard to forget. It is a degraded, devalued, embodied kind of evidence —womanly intuition, gut feelings. Some of it leads us toward encompassing structures like the geography, institutions, and myths of our nationality that we sometimes live within without thinking about too much. Some of it, like the games we play, the foods we eat, and the pictures we pin up on our walls, is too small to see without the aid of art. *The evidence of things not seen* is one of the best formulations I know for the kind of proof literary testimony provides. It describes a kind of evidence that never lets us forget our own faithful or faithless participation in creating an agreed-upon narrative for an event that is by definition lost to us.

I hope to show how, in the cases I offer and others, literary testimony can help their readers to move toward the position of witness that Baldwin describes —one that insists on a connection beyond simple identification. By highlighting the ways in which trauma persists, the ways in which it is ordinary, the ways in which it is part of the foundations of our nation, these storytellers help to bring survivors of trauma in from beyond the pale where evil is thought to do its work, and back —sometimes literally — home. In turn they invite their readers to see themselves as part of a haunted landscape where the effects of trauma cannot be dismissed as beyond the understanding or actions

of ordinary witnesses. Indeed, if we could only remember properly, we might see that we've been caught up in these effects all along. *My memory stammers: but my soul is a witness.*

Trauma studies/Ghost studies

The body of work on trauma that initially inspired this project emerges from literary, philosophical, legal, ethnographic, and clinical testimony about a diverse but identifiable set of horrific experiences: The Holocaust gave rise to a large body of scholarly and literary testimony, first from survivors like Eli Wiesel, Primo Levi, Bruno Bettelheim and others, and later from scholars like Catholic theologian Terrence Des Pres who took their cues from this original body of work to write about both the Holocaust and other historical traumas. War, especially World War I and II, gave rise to, among other trauma theories, Sigmund Freud's body of work, and American work on theVietnam War. Political torture gave rise to work on human rights abuses, especially in South and Central America, where it included the powerful work of the *testimonio*, in Eastern Europe and Russia after the fall of communism, and in South Africa in the aftermath of apartheid and the rise of the Truth Commissions. The rape and physical and sexual abuse of women and children has also given rise to a large body of work, especially in relation to feminist movements in the United States.

As trauma studies became a recognizable field in the early 1990's scholars either set out to create, or were treated as having created, general theories of trauma that bridged the commonalities of theses experiences. Two of these scholars who were

influential on my work in its early stages were psychotherapist Judith Lewis Herman, from whom I have drawn my basic understanding of the clinical dynamics of trauma, and Shoshana Felman, whose work first introduced me to the vocabulary of testimony and witnessing and their implications for literature. Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* drew on all of the bodies of testimony I have surveyed above to create its overarching clinical diagnostic and therapeutic rubric for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD**).** *Testimony,* Shoshana Felman's collaboration with clinician Dori Laub — along with Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, her edited collection *Trauma*: *Explorations in Memory*, and, somewhat earlier, Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* —all became much cited texts within trauma studies as a whole, and among literary critics in particular.[4]

Nevertheless, the specific context from which each of these texts emerges affects the assumptions it makes about how trauma works and what it looks like. Feminism, for example, set the stage for Herman, who had previously written a book on father-daughter incest, and who credits the women's movement with making *Trauma and Recovery* possible. Her work presumes that trauma must always be understood and treated within its larger political context. Though they are American scholars, Felman and Caruth are both implicitly and explicitly tied to the Holocaust, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and the political and intellectual history of Western Europe. It is a crucial tenet of *Testimony* that the Holocaust is an atrocity without precedent and a watershed historical moment that marks the post-World War II era as uniquely post-traumatic.[5]

The history from which my work takes its point of departure –African slavery in the United States, Native American genocide, and the creation of a permanent U.S. white

underclass — thus falls outside the historical purview and assumptions of Felman's work. Accordingly, as I attempt to track the long-term traumatic effects of these histories on contemporary individual and social life, I have ultimately drawn less from the foundational work of Felman and Caruth than from projects like Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt* or Marita Sturken's *Tangled Memories*, which examine the intersections between trauma stories and the national politics and narratives of the United States, or from the work of Lauren Berlant, for whom trauma is less a specific psychic state than a mode of telling and complaint perpetuated by recent struggles over the disappearing public sphere.[6]

Indeed, within the field as I understand it, as the focus shifts away from Europe and psychoanalysis and towards the U.S. and the fate of testimony in national discourse the idea of what trauma is and isn't becomes more flexible, and the connections between oppression and trauma stronger.[7] This is true even in the clinical realm. For example, in "Not Outside the Range," an article by psychotherapist Laura Brown collected in *Trauma*, Brown argues that traumatic events like sexual abuse and rape are so common that they must be considered well within the range of "normal" experience.[8] Brown goes on to explore the possibility that simply *being a woman* —living with both the many small, everyday aggressions and violence and the near-constant awareness of the *risk* of being attacked —may be usefully understood as traumatic.

Brown's work gave me my first glimpse of what I had been looking for in trauma studies: a critical framework that could acknowledge trauma's quotidian aspect, the degree to which trauma is neither exceptional crisis nor individual pathology, but

something that exists firmly within the bounds of everyday life, and therefore within the understanding and social action of its not-so-innocent bystanders. The novels, short stories, essays, and mixed-genre texts I was reading —what I have since come to group under the rubric *literary testimony* — were telling me that catastrophe, for vast numbers of people, is an ordinary occurrence for whose effects it is nevertheless impossible to prepare; that trauma does not disappear when it is repressed or forgotten, but instead takes refuge in the details of everyday life —names and gestures, a sudden chill at the back of the neck, a love of metal, or an aversion to mushrooms. And finally, that to heal or recover from trauma does not mean that trauma and its effects disappear, as the etymology trauma=wound suggests, but that its survivors and bystanders have found a way to live with these effects, and to address the lack they announce not simply through the heroics of action, but through the equally difficult daily task of resisting trauma's structural and literal repetitions.

My attempts to track trauma's quotidian aspects led me to focus less on trauma as an identifiable *event* —a fiction I found increasingly less useful, in any case, to address the massively complex historical traumas of slavery and Native American genocide, and the even less tangible trauma of the working white poor —than as set of exquisitely varied and mind-numbingly repetitive *effects*. As I did so, the metaphors I used to describe and recognize trauma shifted away from the wound, the shock, the blow and toward the fantasmatic: ghosts and haunting, the "unspeakable" that no one can stop talking about, absences around which everything else must bend. Following these ghosts led me to recognize a much more loosely affiliated collection of scholarly work as part of

trauma studies, work I've claimed even when, like Baldwin's essay, it never explicitly mentions the word *trauma* itself.

Following these ghosts led me, for example, to Freud's essay on the uncanny, certainly, but also to Toni Morrison's "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," which asks scholars of American literature to take note of the pressing and elaborately present absences of African-Americans and the great historical trauma of slavery in some of the canon's most revered 19th-century works, and to Eve Sedgwick's 1992 essay "Queer and Now," which frames the project of queer studies itself as haunted and compelled by the suicides of queer adolescents. They led me to Minnie Bruce Pratt's efforts to track the production of white privilege in the streets of her hometown in an essay that also turns out to be an elegy for her father, and to Michael Taussig's efforts to track the electric apparitions that make up the nervous systems of terror and the State. They led me back to W.E.B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk,* which records the haunting psychic and material legacies of slavery, and they led me forward to sociologist Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters*, which makes good on the promise of Du Bois' sociology by challenging us to take ghosts into our account of social life. For Gordon, haunting is "neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis" but "a generalizable social phenomenon of great import." Likewise, the ghost "is not simply a dead or missing person but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life." The place, that is, where "something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known to us." The ghost, we might say, points us quite reliably towards *the evidence of things not seen.*[9]

The rise of trauma studies and the concurrent boom in trauma-centered literature and popular culture has been accompanied by critical voices that remain suspicious of the language and logic of trauma, testimony and witness and —especially pertinent to my project — of ghosts. Haven't we noticed, Ruth Leys points out, that the discourse of trauma always collapses in upon itself? Don't we see, Wendy Brown argues, the way trauma-driven identity politics always runs into the dead-end of victimhood? What does it really mean, asks a skeptical Walter Michaels, to talk about being haunted by the past, and to try to learn from its ghosts?[10]

As a whole, the concerns of these critics and others about trauma's instability, its vagueness, and its tendency to reproduce itself, are strikingly congruent with the history of objections to traumatic testimony, and its repetitive accusations of hysteric malingering. More narrowly, their analyses are excellent diagnoses of how trauma currently functions in national discourse. But the answer to the concerns they raise is not to abandon the discourse of trauma —a project that is, in any case, impossible —but to court its instability and excess in order to expand our notions of what is trauma and testimony looks like. Leys' deconstruction of psychoanalytic trauma theory, for example, is brilliant, but has little effect on its continued cultural import, just as Brown's arguments provide a needed corrective but do not obviate the continued need for a language to describe the reverberation of historical pain.

Michaels' skepticism strikes nearer at the mechanism of haunting. Like Brown, Michaels is fully aware of trauma's currency, and though "'You who never was there'" was written in the first flush of trauma studies' expansion, it still crystallizes the often

less cogent complaints of those who remain suspicious of listening to ghosts. Michaels connects Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist wish to commune with ghosts of literary history past, the fleshy ghost of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (from which he takes his title), and Shoshana Felman's claim that literary testimony can act upon us "like a life," together through the impulse to create a "technology of memory." This technology, whether it is New Historicism, literature, or deconstructive performance theory, is designed to transform what would ordinarily be understood as "history," which Michaels defines as collected, reported events which can be learned about by those who were not there, into "memory," which ordinarily only belongs to those who have experienced the event themselves. Michaels recommends a return to the idea of history. Facts we can all learn and discuss, a history that exists separately from those who constitute it? Yes. But a gothic history, one that constitutes us, and so can haunt us through the daily habits and encounters that we call culture? An idea that may have triumphed, but still a bad idea, a dangerous fiction that lends moral and scholarly authority where there is none.

And yet, when it comes to the project of bearing witness to the dead, or the living made spectral by the radical circumscription of their lives and stories, holding things at the arm's length of "history" or the law, insisting on the separateness of the witness and survivor simply repeats and magnifies the survivor's isolation. Ghosts are not a mechanism for bypassing the facts of history. Rather, they are a means of working towards a full and affective recognition —what Gordon compares to Marx's sensuous knowledge or Benjamin's profane illumination —of that history. Telling ghost stories is

simply a way of recognizing the paradoxical tactility of the things beyond our reach, and the way they seem to keep coming after us.

The banker's daughter

The bystanders to catastrophe or violence who show interest in the scene are often condemned as thrill-seeking voyeurs, exploiters whose imperial gaze replicates the original wound. But these voyeurs are deemed particularly terrible when not merely fascinated, but sentimental — falsely, and facilely empathetic; not the rabble at the freak show, but an educated middle class audience, safe from the wounds they cherish in others (those they have made Other) as reflections of their own neurosis, relief for their ennui. The voyeur consumes catastrophe; writers whose literary testimony attempts to represent catastrophe run a high risk of complicit production. It is this audience, and this risk, Richard Wright has in mind when he chastises himself in the introduction to *Native Son*, "How Bigger Was Born," for having made the "awfully naive mistake" of writing *Uncle Tom's Children*, "a book which even banker's daughters could read and weep over and feel good about."[11]

But he cannot simply reject this audience. Wright continues: "I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears." Not only is *Native Son* written in *reaction* to the weepy banker's daughters, it is written, in part, *to them* — the neutered pronoun "they" so telling, where "he" would have more easily agreed with "no one."[12] The protected, feminine/effeminate bourgeoisie are a difficult audience for

Wright, but a crucial one. This is true not only because they swell the ranks of publishers, critics, and readers who can determine whether or not a book succeeds as a commodity, but because literary testimony yearns not only to give voice to those who have suffered, but to wake to action and vision those whose dreaming innocence and unconscious consent is often as deadly as active malevolence.

This project investigates, in part, the ways in which it is possible for readers who do not identify directly with the events they read about to move from the role of the bystander to that of the witness. Though I hope that this study will address a wide variety of readers, because I have chosen to perform that kind of reading rather than to write a proscriptive Theory of Witness, the implicit reader in this study is its author: a white, middle class woman. So it is that as I write I have always in my mind not only difference, and the ways in which it is impossible to fully know another's life, but the brightly treacherous circle of love and moneyed sameness to which I return every other official holiday. There is always a holiday party, full of the cocktail chatter of bankers and lawyers, doctors and businessmen, housewives and real estate ladies, all good people with troubles of their own. People, especially the women, who have leisure and education, time to read and think, and even to act. Friends, after all, who unfailingly inquire politely, *what are you writing about now?*

Perhaps it is no accident, then, that the texts I have chosen seem so often to have Wright's audience in mind. In Chapter One, I argue that these white middle class women -- among whom are numbered Dorothy Allison's lovers, her fellow consciousness-raising-group members, and the anti-pornography feminists who destroyed

her sense that feminism could be a safe haven -- are the implicit audience for *Bastard Out of Carolina*. In Chapter 2, Sherman Alexie complicates the white New Age princesses that appear elsewhere in his work to make connections between a reservation Indian, and a white, middle class lesbian. In Chapter 3, Patricia Williams has an angry encounter with B., the guilty niece of a "slumlord," whose skin color is left unnamed, but whose middle class contempt for the poor and anger at Williams for "making her feel guilty" for the money her family has "suffered for" marks her as a close, if more conservative, cousin to her liberal, sentimental relative. In my final chapter, I ask how teachers can work to pass on the haunting invitation of literary testimony to a classroom dominated by the sons and daughters of bankers, and by students who need desperately to believe that the classroom is their ticket to joining the ranks of those sons and daughters —among whom were once my own parents.

That it is possible for the banker's daughter to be transformed by reading and learning must remain an open question in this project, though to move forward at all I have to believe that she — that I — can be. For (though banal, it is worth repeating) this question makes its presence felt in the work of any middle- or upper-class academic, whatever their discipline, who would seek to champion, and claim to have been transformed through reading, listening to or observing, the testimony of those whose oppression forms the basis of middle class security. It is an especially important question for witnesses who seek to replicate their own transformation in others.

Believing in literature

That I spent my undergraduate life as a writer, reader, and critic of poetry is a fact as relevant —or more so — to this project as the fact that I grew up an upper-middle class assimilated Jewish bookworm in Boise, Idaho. It helps to explain my attachment to — really, my faith in —the world-changing properties of language, the musical seduction and play of the slippery words themselves. I came to the subject of trauma and literary testimony in part through the loss of this faith, for faith in the magical properties of language was hard to maintain in the face of overwhelming evidence I uncovered as an undergraduate that my understanding of what constituted good and bad literature was maintained by the most violent of epistemologies, that reading and writing literature was an elite project, that language itself was rife with hidden traps. Discovering feminism, and Theory itself, eased these worries only temporarily, for reading feminist literature I saw my own struggle to reconcile love of literature and politics, Adrienne Rich, writing: *knowledge of the oppressor/this is the oppressor's language/yet I need it to talk to you.*[13]

It is this struggle and her own participation in it that Dorothy Allison records in "Believing in Literature." Growing up, Allison writes, a faith in literature and "the dream of my own writing…shaped my belief system" and became "a kind of atheists religion." Writing was a matter of dreaming and faith because Allison was well aware that the stories she wanted to tell, and the way she wanted to tell them, might relegate her to the margins no matter how well crafted they were. Feminism opened up the possibility that she might be able to write openly and unashamedly as a working class lesbian, but it also required seeing Literature as "written by men, judged by men." Feminist, and lesbian and gay presses that were self-consciously political rejected canonical aesthetics in favor

of "authenticity": "We believed editing itself was a political act, and we questioned what was silenced when raw and rough work by women outside the accepted literary canon was rewritten or edited in such a way that the authentic voices were erased" (174). But Allison was never fully convinced:

> Throughout my work with the lesbian and gay, feminist, and small press movements, I went on reading the enemy —mainstream literature —with a sense of guilt and uncertainty that I might be in some way poisoning my mind, and wondering, worrying, trying to develop some sense of worth outside purely political judgments. I felt like an apostate who still mumbles prayers in moments of crisis. I wanted to hear again the still, small voice of God telling me: Yes, Dorothy, books are important. Fiction is a piece of truth that turns lies to meaning. Even outcasts can write great books. (175)

In "Believing in Literature," Allison resolves her dilemma by splitting "Literature" from "the Academy," "the moral equivalents of the church and God": storytelling, craft, language, from the marketplace, official judgment, and college courses in contemporary literature that "never get past Faulkner." I recovered my own faith by teaching creative writing in a psychiatric hospital to adolescents who hated school, but who literally grabbed my Norton anthology out of my hands one day, and demanded poems from there on out, loving the way the literary language took them past the story-flattening lingo of psychotherapy that they had picked up like the teenagers they were.

These two anecdotes are focused around a dilemma —aesthetics vs. politics — that is thankfully outdated, and a quasi-religious rhetoric of belief that is equally suspect. But believing in literature gave Allison the nerve to resist the seductive pull of powerful pre-existing narratives from all sides of the political spectrum with a language formed around the absence of the words and stories she needed. To subvert "broad generalizations" about one's family and life experience "from every theoretical

viewpoint" takes a kind of faith, if not in the divine or the transcendent, then at least in the nervous magic of language that is impossible to pin down, the something more of metaphor, which allows one to create what is not there by comparing two things we have agreed to see.[14] It's a kind of faith about which it is difficult to speak in critical terms (like all arguments based on belief), but that has nevertheless shaped this project from the ground up, and so demands an accounting.

This is an interdisciplinary project. Each chapter participates in a conversation about what literature has to say to another discipline that has claimed authority over the production of truth about trauma and testimony: psychotherapy, anthropology, law. And yet, as I ventured beyond my literary purview, I found anthropologists, clinicians, sociologists, and legal scholars who depended on literature's evidence and who employed narrative strategies usually relegated to fiction and autobiography in their own work.[15] Like me, these scholars wanted to treat literature as something more than a case example, or a jumping-off point into theory, or "real world" action. Instead, they treated it as an indispensable lens through which to view the world, and to describe what they saw, even when they were speaking to audiences that preferred the dream of objectivity and empiricism.

The outbreak, as it were, of lyricism, has been, throughout my reading, a consistent sign, or symptom, of an encounter with trauma, and the effort to take that encounter and its resonance into account. It is an effort that seems to demand lists, repetition, and insistent rhythm. Kathleen Stewart opens her explorations of the cultural poetics of class and storytelling in the Appalachians with the injunction to *picture,*

picture, picture the landscape of her fieldwork and then to *imagine, imagine, imagine* the cultural space where it resides, conjuring up the willingness to bear witness in her readers with sentences linked by those initial repeating words. Avery Gordon opens her argument for taking ghosts seriously as sociological phenomena with an incantation of the myriad spells of power:

> Power can be invisible, it can be fantastic, it can be dull and routine. It can be obvious, it can reach you by the baton of the police, it can speak the language of your thoughts and desires. It can feel like remote control, it can exhilarate like liberation, it can travel through time, and it can drown you in the present. It is dense and superficial, it can cause bodily injury, and it can harm you without seeming ever to touch you. It is systematic and it is particularistic and it is often both at the same time. It causes dreams to live and dreams to die. We can and must call it by recognizable names, but so too we need to remember that power arrives in forms that can range from blatant white supremacy and state terror to "furniture without memories."[16]

Using this kind of literary strategy is a risk. Like a joke, when it works it works very well indeed, and when it fails or finds an unsympathetic audience it falls very, very flat. It is easy to parody, and it signals a kind of willingness to believe in magic, and to embody one's subject that carries the taint of hysteria, of having gone native. Fueled by theory that often remains unspoken, unparsed, it can seem deliberately obscure.

I came to see the willingness to take these risks as a means of honoring the ghost-ridden subjects and testimony of trauma, and this kind of prose as the sign of a fellow traveler. My willingness to follow up on these leads allowed me to find genealogical lines that would otherwise have remained obscured by disciplinary barriers. It is a genealogy that for me goes back to the work of Walter Benjamin, who wrote some of his most beautifully resonant prose as if in compensation, or mourning, for the invention of modern warfare, the shock of modernity and the death of storytelling:

> For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body. [17]

As one might expect, this kind of genealogy also blurs the police line between literature, criticism, and theory —with the excellent, highly resonant results that I have already made an example of in James Baldwin, and that we can see in both the obviously mixed-genre literary testimony of Patricia Williams, and in the novels and short stories I read in my first two chapters. Letting these texts speak their theoretic pieces has meant privileging close reading, and contextual work, rather than bringing a particular theorist or school of thought to bear upon the text. It has also meant trying to honor their testimony with prose that performs the act of witness I have tried to describe.

There are several crucial connections between this kind of performative prose and literary testimony's attempt to witness everyday trauma. It attempts to create a space for unexpected congruence, and for meditation rather than a proscriptive argument. It does so out of an acute awareness of the connection between the witness and what is seen, the way description works to create what is there. Its pedagogical intent is to illuminate complexity and obscurity rather than to make things transparent: The assumption that transparency is possible when bearing witness to trauma has been the basis for much violence —often unintended — against trauma's survivors. As Williams writes: "I will try to write, moreover, in a way that bridges the traditional gap between theory and praxis. It is not my goal merely to simplify; I hope that the result will be a text that is

multi-layered, that encompasses the straightforwardness of life *and* reveals its complexity."[18]

Finally, for me, the lyric excess in this project is the result of a tension between what can be told and what remains unspeakable. It is the trace of impossible intentions to track the invisible, the trace of the broken arc of what was imagined, and what was executed. For there is always another ghost, another story, a finer, more delicate way to see what seems to be not there, a way that eludes the critical, perhaps because it too, demands a kind of faith: *my memory stammers but my soul is a witness*.

Limit cases

While it may be a difficult task for survivors speaking in their own names to answer the demands of traumatic testimony and tell the Truth as it is understood by medicine, law, and the State, the double-speak of telling and not telling might be considered one of literature's defining qualities. The number and kinds of literary texts that represent trauma, or are structured by it, or both, is potentially endless. I have chosen my texts according to two major principles.

First, they function as what Leigh Gilmore calls "limit-cases." That is, like Baldwin, they push at the boundaries of what we currently understand trauma and testimony to be, and so clarify those assumptions and the policing effects of the genre boundaries they create. The texts I read are recognizably a part of the current boom in autobiography and trauma-centered memoirs that Gilmore links to the identity-creating call of social and political movements among "women, people of color, gay men and

lesbians, the disabled, and survivors of violence" and others. They also respond to academic fields that have grown up around such literature and, in the case of Patricia Williams, participate in what Gilmore labels "personal criticism," which she links to concerns about language and agency raised by poststructuralism.[19]

However, partly because Dorothy Allison, Sherman Alexie, and Patricia Williams are important innovators in the field of literary testimony, their work is not always recognized as such. For example, though Allison and Alexie's work has rapidly become standard in anthologies and syllabi within their separate canon's of women's literature and Native American literature, they are less likely to be read together as examples of traumatic testimony. And yet, in tacit recognition of the traumatic charge they carry, they are also unlikely to be read, unmarked, simply as "American Literature." Meanwhile, the mixed-genre legal and social analysis of Williams' *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* is a part of the Critical Race Studies movement but has found some of its most enthusiastic audiences farther afield.[20] My aim in bringing these texts together under the rubric of literary testimony is not to form a new, separate canon, but to illuminate the ways their innovations can show us how to form other seemingly unlikely constellations of understanding around nation, memory, trauma, identity, and the effort to bear witness.

In what ways do these authors perform the work of limit-case traumatic testimony? To begin with, they insist on the unavoidable, persistent presence of trauma in the textures and gestures of everyday life. Responding to the cacophony of America's appetite for crisis narratives, they deal less with the difficulty of speaking the unspeakable than with the problem of speaking it again and again and again, long after

the story is supposed to be over —or at least when it is supposed to have made way for newer, fresher crises. As if in response to Foucaultian concerns about the thin line between testimony and confession, they never stop questioning whether it is possible to simply "speak the truth," and to gain power through that supposed transgression. Instead, they bear witness to a long literary history of stories whose transgression was evanescent, or non-existent. Unlike many theories of trauma, they locate the sources of trauma in multiple events whose relation is not necessarily clear, rather than a single, easily metaphorized wound. And finally, unlike many psychotherapeutic narratives of trauma, they insist on the connection between national and individual trauma, between national history and contemporary individual life.

The history under purview here (my second guiding principle) is three of what I call America's foundational traumas: historical traumas—slavery (Williams) the genocide of indigenous peoples (Alexie) and the creation of a permanent white underclass (Allison)—that are both fundamental to the nation's economic, geographic, and mythic identity, and that stand as an irreparable break in America's story about itself. I have deliberately chosen contemporary texts (all were published in the early 1990's) in order to track the ways in which these foundational traumas remain an active part of our daily lives long after their stories are supposed to be over, and in order, again, to test the limits of the literary's ability to intervene in deeply calcified narratives.

The overarching narrative of my first three chapters moves from the relatively simple struggle to expand the narrative of a currently agreed upon individual traumatic event —the sexual abuse of children —to include the quotidian nature of trauma and its

connection to national politics, through a reformulation of national trauma as primarily, as in Baldwin's story, the ability to make the victims disappear, to the ambitious formulation of trauma as fundamental to, rather than an exception to, the American social contract. In each of these first three chapters I make a case for the reformulation of trauma based on the literary testimony of those who stand at the crossroads of trauma and oppression, and of individual and national history. My hope in so doing is, first, to offer a better lens through which to read these particular works, which have often suffered from genre expectations that miss their mark. Second, I hope to place the valuable insights of these works and others from what Gilmore frames above as the identity-creating autobiographical work in the context of social and political movements of the past thirty years in conversation with the interdisciplinary field of trauma studies.

Chapter One, "Dorothy Allison's Everyday Trauma and the Call to Emergency," traces the way *Bastard Out of Carolina's* narrative strategies reframe trauma and trauma's effects as emerging in everyday life through a series of events, rather than a single, easily locatable catastrophe. Allison's novel disrupts an increasingly standardized narrative of child abuse by locating her narrator's trauma in several competing moments of crisis, by insisting on her girl narrator's sexuality, and by tracing the ways in which her narrator's abuse is not only a contemporary individual trauma, but one of the long-term effects of generations of working poverty. I frame *Bastard's* re-definition of trauma as a response to the politics of emergency that fueled the crisis within feminism marked by the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality, and discuss how a similar politics is at work in the national political calls to emergency that marshal our horror over child abuse, but

foreclose the grassroots testimony of its survivors.

While Chapter One illustrates the ways in which seemingly intimate traumatic stories can be overdetermined by national politics, Chapter Two, "Invented Indians: Tragic Disappearance and the Long Laughter of Survival," asks how it is possible to renew intimate testimony when the trauma at stake has been fully co-opted by the national story. Though the American myth of the tragic disappeared Indian may appear to mourn Native American genocide, it actually works on behalf of genocide by assuming any survivors will soon be gone. Institutions (such as salvage anthropology and its museums), landscapes (such as the reservation, with its "temporary" government housing), and people (such as "Indians") have been invented in the name of this powerful story. Sherman Alexie answers the myth of disappearance by portraying reservations as both complex living communities and psychological landscapes that mark the still-open wound of genocide. But it is Alexie's willingness to see the results of the cultural products of this myth as opportunities for satire and re-appropriation that loosen the grip of tragedy and suggest the ways in which jokes and laughter may make the task of bearing witness possible.

Chapter Three, "Law, Literature and the Traumatic Contract," extends the notion that trauma is central to American life by examining how the institution of slavery has made trauma fundamental to, rather than a disruption of, the American social contract. In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, legal scholar Patricia Williams turns from traditional legal analysis to a wildly inventive mix of literary strategies including parable, allegory, and memoir to track this traumatic contract in the intimate connections between race,

law, and everyday life. Her testimony is a self-conscious performance, a contemporary reprisal of Du Bois' double consciousness. The catalyst for her book, a document that appears to be the bill of sale for her great-great-grandmother, Sophie, to her great-great-grandfather, Austin Miller, a white Southern lawyer, serves as the model for this contract, but I follow Williams as she testifies to both the traumatic contracts of the middle class and her own position as a professional witness, a scholar, a public intellectual and, perhaps most of all, a teacher. While all testimony is inherently pedagogic, one of the most common —and commonly troubled —arenas for Williams' storytelling is the law school classroom.

Chapter Four, "Toward a Pedagogy of Witness," continues Chapter Three's initial exploration of pedagogy by considering the implications of this project's theories of trauma and literary testimony for the work of teaching. Allison, Alexie, and Williams offer a reformulation of trauma as deeply related to the quotidian as well as to shock and crisis. Likewise, a pedagogy of witness also requires the recognition of trauma's quotidian aspect in the classroom: the way trauma makes its presence known through banal but highly charged interactions between teachers and students as much or more than it does through epiphanic crises. Recognizing the presence of trauma explicitly allows us to anticipate these exchanges, and to respond by turning students away from facile identification or displaced anger and guilt and back to a sustained confrontation with the text. In the end, the most basic rhythm of all literature classes —the forgetting and remembering, seeing and seeing again of re-reading —is one of our most powerful tools in moving students beyond trauma's repetitive dialectic of perpetrator and victim,

and into a position of witness.

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[1]James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* (New York; Holt, Rinehart and Winston: 1985). All further citations within the text from this edition. The book itself is a curious document. It is primarily a report on the strange trial of Wayne Williams, a young black man who was tried for murder of two grown men whose deaths were tied to those of the twenty-six children by the dubious logic that because of alcoholism and mental retardation they were "perceived as children." It circles and circles back to the stories of the children, but never fully tells their stories. Instead, Baldwin reports on the media brouhaha surrounding the murders, on the trial and the media on the trial, on the disappointment of the children's mothers, on the history of Georgia and of Atlanta, and on his own abiding sense of otherness in trying to speak to the black community in Atlanta. Thus the issues of connection he wrestles with in the preface serve as a crystallization, rather than catharsis, of those issues in the book itself.

[2]The word *trauma* is derived from the Greek for *wound* and still signifies a physical wound in medical parlance. The trauma I have been describing is generally understood as a psychic wound —an irreparable tear in the survivor's world view. But as both my description of trauma's symptoms and Baldwin's slide from "organism" to "human being" to "persona," suggest, it is difficult, when speaking of psychic trauma, to separate the body from the psyche. From Freud's original conception of trauma as the result of a breach in the brain's "cortical shield" to the commonly perceived somatic symptoms of trauma (symptoms that are sometimes the only indication of the psychic wound) to current research on changes in the brain that indicate trauma —definitions of trauma continue to vacillate between the mental, the physical and even ("rock of ages!") the spiritual. For the importance of the latter in contemporary trauma rhetoric see Ian Hacking's *Rewriting the Soul* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[3]Baldwin's epigraph for *Evidence*, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," is credited to St. Paul.

[4]Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[5]Herman's book is *Father-Daughter Incest* (with Lisa Hirschman) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). Other theorists in this group would include the work of scholars like Jean Laplanche and Maurice Blanchot, as well as the Holocaust-based work of Dominick LaCapra and Marianne Hirsch, and anthologies that seem to cast a wider net such as *Violence, Identity, and Self-determination*, edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997) in which part of Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* is excerpted.

[6]Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt* (Cambridge (England); New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). Berlant has also written several useful articles in this area including "'68, or Something," Critical Inquiry. 21(1):124-55. 1994 Autumn; and "The Subject of True Feeling" The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics in Austin Sarat, ed., *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, University of Michigan Press, 1998. One might also include in this group Janice Haaken's *Pillar of Salt: Gender, Memory, and the Perils of Looking Back* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

[7]One of the more curious —and damaging — trauma effects at work within the field itself is a certain contentiousness over what "counts" as "real trauma," and therefore, as real trauma work. Thus, my picture of the field may be quite different from another scholar's. This is especially true in relation to Holocaust studies. Kali Tal, for example, writes the first chapter of *Worlds of Hurt* on the uses of the Holocaust in America, as a kind of exorcism, before moving on to the Vietnam War, and sexual abuse.

[8]Brown was writing in an effort to change the DSM-III definition of trauma as "the result of an event outside the range of normal human experience." She, along with Herman and other feminist clinicians succeeded.

[9]Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 8. Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28(1):1-34. 1989 Winter. Ann Arbor, MI. Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993). Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Skin, Blood, Heart" in *Yours in Struggle* (New York: Long Haul Press, 1984). Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Du Bois, W.E.B, *Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: New American Library, 1969).

[10]Ruth Leys, *Trauma* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Wendy Brown, *States of Injury* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995). Walter Benn Michaels, "'You Who Never Was There': Slavery and the New Historicism, Deconstruction and the Holocaust
Narrative, 4(1):1-16, 1996 Jan. These scholarly voices were accompanied by popular

responses that ranged from skepticism to backlash.

[11]Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Perennial Library, 1989, 1968), xxvii.

[12]This might be the story, too long to explore here, not of how Bigger was born, but of how Mary Dalton was born. Mary is an effigy of misbegotten white, feminine liberalism, a silly, self righteous, dangerous, naive coquette who is strangled, beheaded and burned for her trouble, but whom Bigger finds himself unable to obliterate. She is nothing but ashes, fragmented bones, a few teeth, when she becomes the evidence that betrays the fantasied object of her rescue and sends him to his death.

[13]Adrienne Rich, "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," from *The Fact of a Doorframe* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 116-19.

[14]Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class & Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y: Firebrand Books, 199), 15.

[15]Just among the anthropologists there I found James Clifford, who begins *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988) with a reading of Williams Carlos Williams' "The Pure Products of America Go Crazy;" Michael Taussig, whose books grow steadily closer to fiction until they reach the grand experiment of *The Magic of the State* (New York: Routledge, 1997) and Kathleen Stewart whose work I discuss below. Among legal scholars I would include Derrick Bell, whose storytelling Patricia Williams comments on in *Alchemy*, and many others among the Critical Race theorists whose work as a whole tends to value example and anecdote. Judith Herman, who I mention above, draws from novels and poems to support and illustrate her arguments as freely as she draws from clinical testimony and composite cases (themselves a professional fiction). This is not an uncommon practice among clinicians and can be traced back to that original book lover, Freud. Sociologist Avery Gordon's work I have discussed above.

[16]Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road : Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). Gordon, 3.

[17]Walter Benjamin "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969, 1968), 84.

[18]Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 6.

[19]Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001). Gilmore says: "These hybrid texts are more difficult to situate along the fiction-nonfiction continuum, but they include the interdisciplinary crossover texts of, for example, scientists who write nonfiction animated by a recognizably autobiographical 'I'.

So, too, professors of literature have produced a discourse of "personal criticism" that levers the autobiographical 'I' to the fore, sometimes in essays published in scholarly journals or anthologies, sometimes in memoirs per se. Woven throughout these innovations is poststructuralism. With its re-conception of language, agency, and the human subject, poststructuralism is significant for writers whose interests in the self are closely linked to an interest in what language about the self can be made to do" (17).

[20]My primary texts are Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (New York: Dutton, 1992), Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (New York : Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995) and Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge,MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), but I draw extensively from other works by Allison and Alexie.

Chapter One

Dorothy Allison's Everyday Trauma and the Call to Emergency

To begin with, a haunting

If we are to take the author at her word (and I mean, though not naively, to do so) Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* began as a haunting.[1] In "A Question of Class," she writes:

> By the time I taught myself the basics of storytelling on the page, I knew there was only one story that would haunt me until I understood how to tell it — the complicated, painful story of how my mama had and had not saved me as a girl.[2]

Like most hauntings, this one compels by tracing the ghostly figure of an absence — an untold story, beyond reach of the would-be teller, that nonetheless has shape and power enough to make known its lack. Allison is held by a complicated, indeterminate past: Is this a tale of maternal heroics? Or betrayal? And from what has she (not) been saved? Allison continues, "Writing *Bastard Out of Carolina* became, ultimately, the way to claim my family's pride and tragedy, and the embattled sexuality I have fashioned on a base of violence and abuse" (*Skin,* 34). What happens to the maternal tale as it becomes a story about family pride and tragedy, and about sex, violence, and abuse? And what might the story, and the storytelling itself, have to do with *a question of class*? What forces have banished this story to the spectral margins from which it calls to its would-be author?

This essay tells the story of how Allison, pursuing the ghost, traveled from the

exciting but confining haunted house of the Southern Gothic's family romance and the standardized contemporary incest narrative, to the crossroads where individual trauma intersects with an enduring history of oppression, a history framed not simply by the psycho-sexual dynamics of childhood, but by the myth-building activities of the nation. Specifically, I look at *Bastard Out of Carolina* as a much needed intervention in a contemporary popular discourse of child abuse in particular, and trauma in general. I begin with an analysis of Allison's narrative innovations, and then place these in the context of the national and feminist histories wherein diverse grassroots testimony about child abuse became a politically viable "national emergency" through the effacement of class and other forms of difference.

The standardization of popular narratives of child abuse parallels the development of what Lauren Berlant has demonstrated is the increasing dominance of trauma and psychic pain as the official (and sometimes the only) rhetoric for public protest. Ironically, as the power of testimony became a powerful political tool, and feminism and other political movements made it possible to connect intimate violence like abuse to the public sphere, mainstream politicians became equally adept at containing and manipulating these stories. Certain "unspeakable" trauma stories are now, within strictly narrow bounds, endlessly spoken. They threaten to collapse, as Berlant puts it, "into banality, a crumbling archive of dead signs and tired plots," even as the people whose experiences are represented by these stories remain "underdescribed and overattached."[3]

Literature has long been a space where testimony and experience can be re-imagined and reinvented. My concern here is not only with general renewal, but with an

expansion of our understanding of trauma as synonymous with extraordinary shock and *crisis*. I show how Allison's novel reframes trauma and trauma's effects as emerging from everyday life, or from a series of events rather than a single, easily locatable catastrophe. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, child abuse is not only a contemporary individual trauma, but one of the long-term effects of generations of working poverty.

My reading of Allison's literary intervention is, in part, a case history for what I call an *invitation to witness*. Clinicians often remark on trauma's "infectious" quality — the ease with which trauma seems to breed more trauma, and the difficulty of resisting falling into variations of the roles of victim and perpetrator. The invitation to witness is an opportunity to resist the infectious, endlessly replicated dualities of the victim/perpetrator relationship, and to take up instead more consciously, and so more vulnerably, the too-often transparent position of the reader who reads and is moved by a testimony to a trauma other than her or his own. By taking up the invitation to witness I do not mean simply becoming conscious of one's subject position, though that is certainly a beginning. I mean deliberately adopting and excavating the position of the bystander, the listener, the watcher, in order to fill that vacuum with a vision and possibility other than identification with the perpetrator or victim, and the myriad variations on this theme.

The psychotherapist (and, in a different way, the law) struggles toward a positive production — a commonly agreed-upon truth fashioned from fragments of post-traumatic memory woven into a coherent narrative —testimony.[4] The writer, on the other hand, may employ *literary* testimony to produce, as Allison does, a series of interlinking stories

whose gaps and connections frame the blank spaces and silences to which the production of empirical truth is often hostile. Literary testimony's aim is not healing and closure. Rather, it attempts to *pass on a haunting.* It does not offer readers the experience of trauma. That can never be accessed. Instead, literary testimony shows readers how trauma ruptures truths known and agreed upon, and points us toward the persons and stories previously made spectral by those truths. The reader who takes up the invitation to read as a witness completes literary testimony's desire to pass on the haunting. But this transformation is not accomplished through simple identification. The witness is not a new victim, but one who is haunted by the suffering of another, still strange but not Other.

The witness to literary testimony is the one who watches silently, but who also is moved to speak or write, endlessly, because there can be no rescue. The witness is suspended between the call to action and the dread of repetition. The witness wants to know, desperately, *the truth about what happened*, but also knows that trauma makes this impossible. The witness sees in her- or himself a complexity and capacity for pain in common with the survivor who testifies, but nonetheless must remain at a distance, respectful or otherwise. The extent to which readers can take up this position, the precise nature of the transformation from bystander to witness, and whether witnesses may go on to transform others, are all questions that ground this essay.

Plot trouble

Allison's struggle to tell the story that haunts her is primarily a problem of

narrative strategy. To understand this, it is helpful to envision that struggle taking place among an array of plots-in-waiting. *Bastard Out of Carolina* is the story of its white girl narrator Bone (Ruth Anne Boatwright), her mother, Anney Boatwright, her stepfather Glen, and the extended Boatwright clan, all of whom live in Greenville, South Carolina in the deep working poverty they have suffered for generations. Though *Bastard* is full of root magic and uncanny repetition, it is often described as the realist, or "authentic"and semi-autobiographical story of Bone's struggle against her stepfather, Glen who physically, sexually and psychically abuses her.[5] This plot summary is true but not complete. It drastically forecloses the possibilities Allison opens to us. It banishes the deep context of daily life among the Boatwrights to mere backdrop; it privileges Allison's biography over the Southern Gothic literary heritage of the Boatwrights, with the further effect of effacing the tradition of incest in that genre; it masks the degree to which *Bastard* is equally a coming-of-age story, with that genre's attendant emphasis on nascent sexuality; and it ignores the centrality of Bone's relationship to her mother, Anney.

In short, it sets us up to read *Bastard* in a crude and powerful version of contemporary trauma discourse, beginning with the assumption that Bone's abuse is what creates her story in the first place, that her abuse and its perpetrator are what is most real and authentic about her, and that understanding this abuse will unlock her identity. No matter how brave and plucky the victim, in this plot line the perpetrator controls the pacing and the structure of the story — its climax is twinned with his own. The nature of trauma itself goes unquestioned. The perpetrator/victim dialectic becomes both the

driving force of the story, and the sole model for the dialectic of reader responses: We are titillated/terrified, we read with fascination/horror, we are possessed by the text, undone, and helpless before it, but at the same moment, in self-defense as it were, we diagnose,[6] we pass judgment. There is no room for witness. Wrapped up in the drama of identification, we take sides, for or against, and our own position, that vexed, troubled, potentially troubling position of the reader, becomes absolutely clear — brittle as glass, certain as a vacuum.

And still in the margins, banished, is the story that Allison would tell: a story of family pride, and of hard-won sexual desire, the haunting story *how my mama had and had not saved me*, a story that takes up explicitly, *the question of class.* Indeed, the ease with which the limitation of Allison's novel to a universal abuse story proceeds apace with the critical assumption that the story is autobiographical points to a deeper assumption resting on class: namely, that someone like Allison, a woman from the working class writing about her own abuse and her family, is unlikely to rework her story into a fiction that deliberately intervenes in an established literary canon.[7]

Women in general are vulnerable to a kind of critical banishment-by-autobiography, but the woman who tells a trauma story that emerges from multi-generational oppression is, by fiat, a native informant thrice-over, judged by her ability to give her readers the real (but aesthetically satisfying) inside story. No matter how many times she writes for the *New York Times* and its ilk as a public intellectual, a portion of Allison's audience will be happy to have her remain an unusually bright representative of her kind, a brave survivor of individual trauma rather than what she is — the active

member of a political, sexual, and intellectual community. (There is another story here, of course, about Allison's awareness of her status as native informant, and her canny exploitation of it.) By extension, the kind of familial history molded through oral storytelling that Allison is at pains to record in *Bastard,* a telling and retelling that is often the only line between defiant pride and self-loathing shame, is reduced to dysfunction, a set of distracting lies through which the diagnosing outsider (led by Allison's information, of course) sees "the truth about what happened."

In *Bastard Out of Carolina* itself, the most dramatic example of a standardized narrative's painful foreclosure is Bone's inability to produce official state testimony. The scene, which occurs near the end of the novel, is an encounter between Bone, who is in the hospital moments after being raped by her stepfather, and a kind, soft-spoken sheriff, in his own way an outsider. The sheriff has come to take Bone's statement, but while the sheriff waits for her tell him about "the assault" Bone wonders where to begin, whether beginning is possible: "How could I begin? Where would I begin? With Aunt Alma going crazy? With the moment Daddy Glen grabbed me and tore my shirt? I thought of the moment in the parking lot so long ago, waiting to find out about Mama and his son" (*Bastard,* 298).

Bone's confusion over where her trauma story starts is generated by the disparity between her experience, which includes generations of familial trauma and years of individual abuse, and the pre-prepared plot the sheriff expects her to narrate: the story that will explain the bruises and blood documented by Greenville County Hospital. To reduce her testimony to the bare facts of the rape, Bone recognizes, is to give up her

identity — first to that narrow story, and then to the Law, no matter how polite and well-intentioned its representatives. Only moments before her encounter with the Sheriff, Bone felt herself turn from a "dangerous" survivor to "a girl, hurt and alone", under the gaze of the painfully young deputy who typecasts her — and himself — into the roles most readily at hand. (Bone thinks grimly to herself that he "probably watched too much TV" and "thought of himself as the public defender type.") Bone's subsequent exchanges with the sheriff are brief, subtle, and mutually destructive: Bone loses the ability to define herself, and the sheriff loses his own shape under her gaze.

When Sheriff Cole first enters the room, Bone notes his difference: "Olive complexion, big nose, bigger ears, strong chin, and thin gray hair combed back off his face — Sheriff Cole didn't look like anybody else I knew." His voice is "soft, almost lazy...respectful" and Bone wishes she could "talk, tell him what had happened." However, as Sheriff Cole puts "the point of the pen to the paper" he offers her an implicit trade: "No one is gonna be allowed to hurt you.... Just tell me who beat you, girl. Tell me." Implying that she is still in danger and in need of his protection, Sheriff Cole asks not simply for her testimony but for the assignation of blame, and the reduction of danger to the beating and the beater (*Bastard*, 295-6).

Though Sheriff Cole has not in any clear way become abusive, he has presumed to know: to know Bone, to know what is best, to know what is right, to know how to find an answer, to know he can do so in the first place. Like, no doubt, many of *Bastard*'s readers, and other bystanders to a trauma, he dreams of a trauma story that will clearly identify the victim and the perpetrator and *the limits of the traumatic event*. At the

moment that Sheriff Cole presumes to know, his chance of bearing witness to Bone's testimony disappears. Daddy Glen, after all, was sure he knew Bone better than anyone — her true hateful self, her most secret desires. (It's the perpetrator's cliche, isn't it? *You know you want it, don't tell me you don't.*) Bone responds to the Sheriff's questions with silence. She thinks to herself: "His voice was calm, careful, friendly. He was Daddy Glen in a uniform. The world was full of Daddy Glens, and I didn't want to be in the world anymore." When Sheriff Cole leans forward "too close," and calls her "Honey," she recoils — "I hated him for calling me that. He didn't know me." *He was Daddy Glen in a uniform*. When Sheriff Cole tries to reassure Bone by promising to "take care of everything" Bone reiterates: "No. He thought he knew everything. Son of a bitch in his smug uniform could talk like Santa Claus, promise anything, but I was alone." Whereas before his voice seemed "soft, almost lazy" and made her "wish I could talk, tell him what happened," now Bone realizes "I didn't want anyone to know anything." She looks at the sheriff's face and sees "...my whole life in Sheriff Cole's eyes, contemptible, small, meaningless" (*Bastard* 296-7).

Just as Bone is on the verge of becoming a cipher, Bone's Aunt Raylene, herself a survivor of yet-untold trauma, wrestles her way past the hospital staff to ward off the sheriff. When he insists on the need for "an investigation" she answers:

> "You're right, there has to be justice. There has to be a judgment day too, when God will judge us all. What you gonna tell him you did to this child when that day comes?"
>
> "There's no need —" he began, but she interrupted him.
>
> "There's need," she said. God knows there's need." Her voice was awesome, biblical. "God knows." (*Bastard*, 298)

Raylene trumps state authority with divine law. Hers is a moral victory, over the police who demanded the impossible, and the hospital workers who tried to isolate Bone. But Bone's story remains unheard in these official spheres even as the reader approaches the end of Allison's novel. Bone is unable to escape, on one side, the judgment of the world, and on the other, the life- threatening narrowness of her familial bonds. The need Raylene speaks of remains unmet, barely articulate, and of biblical dimensions.

Competing testimonies, or What the sheriff doesn't know

The Sheriff's failed attempt to take Bone's testimony is one of several scenes in *Bastard* where Allison shows us both Bone's absolute yearning for a witness, and the repeated failure of those who ask her to speak. The brash young doctor, newly arrived from the North, thrills and terrifies Bone with his open anger and his contempt for Anney. Her Aunt Raylene calls in her uncles to look at the wounds Bone carries from Glen's beatings, mercilessly exposing Bone's body against her will. The uncles leave to brawl with Glen and threaten to kill him, spurring Anney's further retreat from the family. All of Bone's potential witnesses are sure they know what they are seeing, and are swift and certain in their actions. The exception is Bone's Aunt Ruth.

Bone goes to stay with her Aunt Ruth at Anney's request, to take care of her as she grows more and more ill. Her days are filled with Ruth's stories, stories about the Boatwright clan that, Bone observes, seem to grow more numerous and more fervent as Ruth's body begins to waste away. "I began to suspect," she says, "that my main purpose was to provide Aunt Ruth with an audience, someone who would nod at appropriate

moments and not interrupt." Bone listens for weeks to Ruth filling in the blanks of a family history Bone has long been unable to sort out for herself. But at last Bone finds herself unable to concentrate on Ruth's stories because of her uncertainty about her own: Will she ever go home to Anney? Does she want to? Finally, she blurts out to Ruth: "Daddy Glen hates me." Ruth responds, "Tell me, Bone... You think I'm dying?" (*Bastard*, 122)

Ruth's answer is not a non sequitur, but an offer to trade witness for witness — no one in the family will admit to Ruth's face that they know she is dying, just as no one will talk openly to Bone about Glen's treatment of her. Bone has moved in with Ruth and become her caretaker, they both know, because Bone can't live safely with Glen. Ruth admits that she doesn't know what to do, and can't imagine an intervention outside of Anney's consent. Though this (along with her illness) makes her seem passive compared to Bone's other would-be rescuers, she is able to afford Bone some relief, security, and emotional connection. Later, for example, Bone draws on her memory of Ruth's suffering in order to find the strength to resist Glen. Crucial to understanding the power of Ruth's witness is to see how she hears the silent counterpoint to Bone's testimony about Glen: Bone's protection of Anney, her longing for her, and the loud silence of her mother's absence, an absence that is repeatedly linked to the source(s) of Bone's trauma.

Returning to the scene at the hospital with Ruth's comparatively successful response to Bone in mind, it is easier to see that the moment Sheriff Cole begins to look like Daddy Glen is also the moment Bone realizes her mother, Anney, has abandoned her

at the hospital:

> "You're not hurt too bad," he told me. "Doctor says you'll be fine."
> I lifted my head, knowing fear showed in my face.
> "No concussion, the doctor says." He took a little notebook out of his pocket, opened it. "You're a little shocky, need to be careful for a while. Some of your people are out there. I got the doctor talking to them."
> "Mama?" My voice was a hoarse croak.
> "I an't talked to your mama yet. Your aunts are here, though..."
> ...I closed my eyes. Mama hadn't talked to him. I felt suddenly so tired I could barely draw breath. (*Bastard*, 296)

All of Bone's refusals to discuss Glen's assault are accompanied by references to her mother's absence. "Mama, I almost whispered, but clamped my teeth together. I couldn't tell this man anything. He didn't care about me. No one cared about me" (*Bastard*, 297). Even when Raylene arrives to save her, the first thing Bone notes is that she "wasn't Mama."

Anney's absence at the hospital is preceded by several other crucial moments of absence, beginning with her uncanny absence from Bone's birth. In the novel's opening pages, Bone explains that she was "not strictly there," since she was "asleep for three days" after flying out through the windshield of Uncle Travis' car during his drunk-driving accident. Because Anney is "not there" to bluff her way through the hospital's request for a father's name, Bone is "certified a bastard by the state of South Carolina." Anney's attempts to get the county to remove the red "ILLEGITIMATE" stamp across the bottom of Bone's certificate become local legend. Bone's grandmother, angry at Anney's shame, tells her to stop trying: "You intended to frame that thing? You wanted something on your wall to prove you done it right?... The child is proof enough. An't no

stamp on her nobody can see" (*Bastard*, 3).

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, the fact that Bone comes to bear a stamp on her body that is visible to the medical and legal officials, and to Anney's own family, partly through the same mechanism of Anney's shame and pride, is Anney's tragedy as well as Bone's. The central traumatic scene of *Bastard* is neither Glen's rape of Bone nor Bone's failed testimony to the sheriff, but the intervening scene in which Anney betrays Bone. The substance of Anney's betrayal is absence and silence. These resonate in the silent refrain of Bone's "Mama hadn't" "Mama wasn't" as well as Bone's own internal silence on the subject. In the context of the hospital room, the doctor, the sheriff and his notepad, the story of Anney's betrayal belongs to the spectral category of the unspeakable.

It is unspeakable first because there is no role for Anney in the simple dialectic of victim and perpetrator. She will not be part of the official record (though she may be subject to its actors and laws). For closely related reasons, Anney's actions are unspeakable because Bone does not have an adequate label, cannot find a kind or type for Anney's actions — and here Allison invites her readers to pause as well. What are we to make of Anney? How can we speak of her? Certainly she qualifies easily, as do so many women, for that enormously expansive patriarchal category, "bad mother." I have been speaking of her "betrayal," a crisis moment immediately following Glen's rape of Bone, when Anney chooses Glen over Bone. But neither the label "bad mother" nor "betrayer" are acceptable to Bone. Neither take into account the fact that to return to Glen, Anney had to leave him in the first place. They require that Bone understand her relationship to

Anney solely within the bounds of a single, climactic choice. But Anney will return to Bone again, and leave her again, before the novel is over, violating the possible closure of the scene's climax.

Glen's final assault on Bone, unlike Anney's actions, is completely predictable, almost familiar -- its the moment we've all been dreading and waiting for. But instead of setting up Glen's assault as the culmination of his power and control, Allison writes the scene as Bone's clearest rebellion, and Glen's most virulent, but also most hopeless, violence. When Glen catches Bone alone on the front porch at Aunt Alma's and tries to bully her into telling him that she will move back home she refuses to speak to him at all and tells him to leave. He retaliates by lifting her off the floor and shaking her. Bone thinks: "I had always been afraid to scream, afraid to fight. I had always felt like it was my fault, but now it didn't matter. I didn't care anymore what might happen. I wouldn't hold still anymore" (*Bastard* 282). Glen is much stronger than 12-year-old Bone, a fact Allison makes abundantly clear. Bone can't protect herself from rape anymore than she could stop Glen's beatings. Nevertheless, the point-counterpoint of Bone's attempts at resistance and Glen's rapidly escalating physical violence seems, paradoxically, to point up Glen's inherent weakness and Bone's bravery. Glen's reactions are so wildly out of proportion to the resistance Bone offers that he seems desperate and afraid, not calculating and sadistic. Like Raylene, Bone leaps past the physical fact of her weakness to become an exalted figure, an instrument of God's righteousness: "God will give you to me. Your bones will melt and your blood will catch fire. I'll rip you open and feed you to the dogs. Like in the Bible, like the way it ought to be, God will give you to me. God

will give you to me!" (*Bastard*, 285).

Bone's painful description of Glen's assault is startlingly concrete and exact. It is almost literally a blow-by-blow report:

> He threw me away from him so that my back hit the counter and I slipped down, falling as he came toward me, kicking at me. His boot hit me solidly in the shoulder. His arm came down, caught my right wrist, and jerked hard, pulling me up sharply, then dropped me. Something gave, crunching audibly, while a wave of sickening heat followed, and my arm flopped uselessly under my body. (*Bastard*, 284)

Bone's perspective remains surprisingly clear. Except for the details of her internal resistance, the reader is never released from her view of Glen's violence. There is something here of the disconnection and disassociation common to many clinical descriptions of trauma, but Bone's attempts at retaliation seem to counter the idea that Bone is simply "not there." Neither does the passage slide into a lingering, eroticized description of the wounds on Bone's body, or Glen's excitement — the "soft porn movie-of-the-week stuff" against which, in several of her interviews, Allison has explicitly stated she is writing. Instead, Bone's story remains a record. It is an emotionally charged, extremely painful record, but a record nonetheless.

Like Bone's struggle with the Sheriff, the rape is centered around the production of evidence and truth, with Bone's body as the final proof of Glen's unforgivable transgression. Anney walks in while Glen is still lying on top of Bone and begins to hit him with "canisters off the stove, pans, glasses, plates, anything she could throw at him." As Anney carries on the fight, Bone briefly rejoices that there is so much *evidence — so much to be seen*. "I smiled. The corners of my mouth tore, but it didn't matter"

(*Bastard*, 286). She fantasizes about how it will now be possible for her to kill Glen because of the clarity of her record:

> Strength was coming back and with it thought... Look how hurt I was. There would be a story we could tell. It would be self-defense. It would be justifiable. I grinned to feel the blood trickling down my neck. Look how hurt I was! Thank you, God. (*Bastard*, 289)

In sharp contrast, Bone's description of her mother's betrayal is marked not by what others will be able to witness, but what Bone herself sees, and then must look away from, uncomprehending. In a scene that uncannily repeats Glen's proposal of marriage to Anney, Glen leans into the car and hangs onto it as Bone and Anney sit inside. He tries to reach through the window to Anney in spite of her repeated blows. "Kill me, Anney. Go on. I can't live without you. I won't. Kill me! Kill me!" Glen seems to offer his own annhilation, but his command is blackmail — abandon your daughter or become a murderer. He slides all too easily from perpetrator to victim, forcing Anney to respond to his new position, to come to his rescue or become a perpetrator.

> "Kill me," he said again, louder. "Kill me." He butted his head into the metal door, pulled back, and rammed again. He shouted every time his head hit, the thuds punctuating the cries. "Kill me. Kill me."
>
> Mama was so close I could have touched her, but her head was turned away, turned to Glen. I could not reach her. "Oh God," she cried, and I let go of the steering wheel.
>
> "No," I whispered, but Mama didn't hear me.

Anney's gaze moves away from Bone and her injuries and towards the wounds Glen creates on his own body until finally she intervenes: "She was holding him, his head pressed to her belly. His bloody hairline was visible past the angle of her hip." He is thoroughly infantilized, his self-destruction nothing but the narcissism of a toddler's

tantrum, his assault on Bone nothing but temporary insanity: "I just went crazy, Anney!" (*Bastard*, 290).

It is the image of Anney holding Glen, the moment when he replaces her as child, that will return to haunt Bone in the fragmented, iconic form of traumatic memory. It is this scene, too, at which Bone refuses to — cannot— look. Though she has been shouting at Glen with both internal and external voice all through his assault on her, now she is silenced and her brief fantasy of violence quickly fades into pure self-annihilation:

> My mouth closed over the shout I would not let go. I'd said I could never hate her, but I hated her now for the way she held him, the way she stood crying over him. Could she love me and still hold him like that. I let my head fall back. I did not want to
> see this. I wanted Travis' shotgun or my sharp killing hook. I wanted everything to stop, the world to end, anything, but not to lie bleeding while she held him and cried. I looked up into the white sky going gray. The first stars would come out as the sky darkened. I wanted to see that, the darkness and the stars. I heard a roar far off, a wave of night and despair waiting for me, and followed it out into the darkness. (*Bastard* 291)

Allison does not locate Bone's central trauma in the beating and rape — that counts as evidence, a clear victimhood that will justify revenge. Instead, it is what Bone witnesses that is the central trauma of the book. It is what is beyond Bone, a violation of her world view, and that for which there is no clear retaliation, no previous story, no expectation. After this scene, nothing: "a wave of night...despair...darkness."

Allison does not minimize the violence Glen perpetrates on Bone, the rape is not merely a screen for the real trauma of maternal betrayal. But she presents it to us as neither an internal psychodrama of the victim, nor a titillating re-exploitation. Instead, she gives us a record and invites us to recognize how the spectacular nature of this

record, its traumatic content, resides as easily in the readers' fears and expectations, the things we think we know, the actions we think we would take, as it does in Bone's suffering. She also shows us how easy it is for Glen to traverse the distance from perpetrator to victim: as easy as it is for the reader to complete a circuit of identification between the two, gazing on the visible stamps Glen leaves on Bone's body even as we flinch because Bone is the one describing them. Allison invites us to imagine a trauma discourse in which it would be possible to move outside this circuit, to intervene in the production of victims, and to find a way of hearing the competing testimonies that make themselves known through haunting absences in the stories we do hear. That is, she invites us to imagine a trauma discourse in which it would be possible to tell Anney's story, a task that *Bastard* does and doesn't complete, as Allison's mother did, and did not, save her.

Political plots, sexual panic, and national emergencies

Literary testimony is not simply the story of a trauma, but the effort to wrest control over the telling of that story from a more dominant discourse, one that seeks to contain elements of the story that might effect social change and justice for the trauma's survivors. So far, I have argued for the ways in which *Bastard Out of Carolina*'s narrative strategies invite us to read against a dominant narrative of child abuse in which the perpetrator sets the pace of the plot and lives at its center. Here, as I turn my attention to the means by which that dominant narrative of abuse was produced, I want to focus on how *Bastard*, with its multiple narratives and its insistence on the everydayness

of trauma in the lives of the working poor, intervenes in a crisis-driven *call to emergency* that only rarely serves the survivors of abuse and other trauma.

If the story of how Allison's mother did and did not save her is the primary specter haunting *Bastard* —its subject —*Bastard's* secondary ghost is Allison's complex relationship with the women's movement, particularly the bitter rift that emerged at the 1982 Barnard conference "The Politics of Sexuality," between the conference participants and conference protesters associated with Andrea Dworkin's political action group, Women Against Pornography (WAP). The middle class women Allison loved and befriended, as well as the women who reviled her at that conference, the women of *The Women Who Hate Me* (Allison's first book, a collection of poetry first published in 1983), were *Bastard*'s first audience.[8]

But they were not its only intended audience. By the time *Bastard* was published, the need to complicate national discourses about abuse and poverty was as urgent as ever. The politics of emergency that spurred the Barnard debate were both presaged and echoed by a declaration of emergency issued on behalf of America's abused children from three Washington administrations over the course of the twentieth century. The third, made in 1990, two years before *Bastard* was published, co-opted both feminist testimony and WAP's call to emergency action in ways that worked directly against the aims of the feminists. Though the political intentions of Washington and WAP may have been quite different, the end results of their emergencies were uncannily similar: the effacement of class and other important differences in the experience to which trauma survivors testified, a general flattening and standardization of survivor testimony, and the

movement of power away from victims and into the hands of their would-be rescuers.

The professionalization of child abuse

The United States' history of child abuse is, with one important exception, a case study in containing the potential of trauma to effect social change by pathologizing its survivors and turning them over to experts. In his article "The Making and Molding of Child Abuse," philosopher of science Ian Hacking traces the public recognition of child abuse, and the use and understanding of the term itself, in America (and to a lesser extent, England) from the late Victorian Age to the early 1990's. Hacking locates the origins of contemporary attention to child abuse in the Victorian Prevention of Cruelty to Children Movement. Part of a general reform movement that included child labor, the women's vote, and cruelty to animals, "cruelty to children," which included neglect and physical abuse but not incest, was understood as a problem of the poor that led directly to juvenile delinquency (and thus was a threat to an orderly propertied society). In the United States the movement helped to bring about its own end by convincing President Theodore Roosevelt that this problem should be attended to by professionals. In 1909 "…Roosevelt proclaimed that the nation should attend as much to its child crop as to its farm crop" and promised a federal agency would take care of the matter. By 1912 the Children's Bureau of Health, Education and Welfare was founded alongside the sizable National Social Workers' Exchange, and the public life of cruelty to children and its amateur charitable institutions was over. [9]

Once the care of mistreated children was professionalized, Hacking records, the

notion of mistreatment as part of a complex set of social problems, of which the difficulties of poverty and class oppression were an important part, never fully held sway in mainstream discourse again. (This does not mean, of course, that individual social workers, lawyers, and doctors didn't see mistreatment this way.) Our contemporary notion of child abuse first emerged as a *medical* problem, a 1962 epidemic of "battered child syndrome," proof of which was presented by a group of doctors in Colorado who used x-rays of infants with broken bones to convince their conservative pediatric audience that parents were capable of beating their children. Picked up by both the professional and popular media, this medical testimony was powerful, and its effects were widespread. Part of its power lay in the idea that battering was not a social problem but a *sickness*, and "the batterer" a pathological type, likely (on no empirical evidence) to also have been battered as a child.[10]

The medicalization of child abuse helped clear the way for it to become a viable bipartisan political issue. No longer tied solely to left-wing concerns about the distribution of wealth and services and the downside of capitalism, abuse could be addressed as a medical problem and, most importantly, a medical fact. Though still understandable as a traumatic specter endangering the nation's children, it was a manageable specter, described empirically by quantifiable evidence, and therefore within the realm of law and lawmakers. By 1973, Walter Mondale, then a senator and chair of the Subcommittee on Children and Youth, could lead a campaign for a bill that would recognize abuse not as "a poverty problem" but as "a national problem."[11] Though potentially radical —it implies the problem of violence is not a problem that happens to

those Others, the poor —in fact, this formula predictably allowed lawmakers to evade the subject of poverty (and gender, and race, and any other differences) altogether. In 1990, after a decade of federal cuts in welfare and other social services, a presidential panel could announce that child abuse was a "national emergency" without addressing, as Hacking puts it, "unpleasant topics like filth, danger, the stench of urine in the halls, broken elevators, smashed glass, curtailed food programs, guns." Instead, the panel called for a campaign to raise national awareness, and an easier system of reporting abuse to the authorities.[12]

Grassroots possibilities and feminist plots

The great exception in Hacking's history of the professionalization of child abuse is, of course, the women's movement. It would take the women's movement to draw professional attention to the predominant gender of the batterer, and to connect the abuse of children —and women, "battered woman" had been derived from the 1962 syndrome —to the patriarchal oppression of women. Hacking credits the women's movement with raising contemporary awareness of incest and sexual abuse, both of which are now firmly linked to our conception of child abuse. Just as importantly, I would argue, the women's movement had the potential to transform the silent figure of the "battered child" so important to the universalizing medical discourse of the 1960's into a speaking, acting adult. Even in the early cruelty to children movement, the child was a passive figure to be fought over and rescued. The question was never one of helping children and women to protect themselves, but of deciding which experts were best suited to rescue them. The

survivor testimony and action that emerged from the women's movement raised the possibility that these children could grow up, gain power, and seek social justice, acting on their memories without "professional help" in ways far beyond pathological repetition.

Consciousness-raising groups, small groups of diverse women who gathered with the express purpose of sharing their stories in confidence with one another, were crucial to the creation of new testimony about abuse. CR groups provided the ideally supportive atmosphere for women who had previously been ashamed and afraid to speak about physical and sexual abuse. Women testified on their own behalf, responding to others' stories rather than questions directed by a medical or legal expert. Allison records one of her own initial experiences with a CR group in "Shotgun Strategies." She describes the startling connection she made by sharing stories of abuse with a white, upper-class woman whom, she writes, she would otherwise have dismissed as too different from herself to be an ally:

> That was my life she was talking about, a world removed from the place and the family where she had grown up, but my life just the same. Both of us had grown up believing that being beaten is normal, that being backhanded is ordinary, that being called names is a regular part of life. That everyone does it, that they just don't talk about it in public. We both had thought ourselves freaks. Monsters. What we discovered talking to each other — and eventually there were four or five others discovering this together — is that we were cut from the same cloth. For all of us, the family had been a prison camp: a normal everyday horror, fully known and hidden. (*Skin*, 53)

But "Shotgun Strategies" quickly moves on to detail what Allison has *not* heard from other survivors. It is these omissions, she writes, that formed the basis of *Bastard*: The

story of her mother —"What has always been missing for me, both in reading books about incest and in talking to other survivors, is how I felt about my mother" —and the place of abuse in the larger scheme of her extended family and their poverty —"Rather than the details of sexual abuse, it is the questions of family and loss and betrayal I want to examine."

I have already discussed these omissions in detail, but there is something else here, too. Throughout the passage, Allison explicitly reiterates the relationship of abuse to the quotidian. Its survivors had always suspected it was "normal…ordinary…a regular part of life," something that "everyone does" but "just don't talk about it public." The "normal everyday horror" of abuse links the two women. And yet, Allison goes on to cite this paradoxically quotidian aspect of trauma as something that she finds missing from most survivor testimony, something she hoped to make clear with *Bastard*: "I wanted to show people that everyday life is everyday life even if you are being beaten and raped" (*Skin,* 54).

I would argue that she has succeeded, but also that this quality of *Bastard* is difficult to capture in the vocabulary and categories available to a critical essay, because it is a process of accretion and accumulation. In *Bastard* there is no "background," only a shifting series of linked plots demanding our attention: the importance of this can't be overemphasized. There are long stretches of the novel in which Bone is not being beaten or raped, counterpoint passages of planning rebellion, or intimate apocalyptic fantasies of fire and violence followed by orgasmic release, or simply, always, of work — tending to her sick aunt, planting vegetables, helping in the kitchen or at the lunch counter,

watching her sister Reese, making tea or lemonade for adults who want her out of the way for a moment, while they tell a story not meant for her to hear. And there are also a series of equally quotidian, seemingly inevitable, but no less traumatic events: boy cousins completing their rite of passage at the county farm, girls turning up pregnant, as Anney did with Bone, at 14. The most dramatic moments of Bone's abuse story are inextricable from Bone's Aunt Ruth dying of cancer, or her Aunt Alma tearing apart her house with rage and love before leaving her husband — for a while at least. These are events that strain against the current definition of the traumatic, for they do not so much signal a break in the world view of their survivors, so much as they form a map to their world's workings.

The notion of quotidian trauma is incompatible with crisis and rescue. It breaks the frame of the expected trauma narrative, and is therefore more difficult to communicate, and more difficult for an audience to recognize, even more so, perhaps, in everyday life than in literary criticism. The tension between connection and incomplete witness Allison describes in "Shotgun Strategies" is easy to track throughout the collection in which it appears, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature.* In *Skin*, every time Allison returns to the story of abuse and class she does so in the context of the feminist community —a circle of friends, ex-lovers, a current lover. But these women are never an easy audience. Almost invariably white and middle class, they, like the CR group, provide a context in which Allison may speak, but they are never able to hear her testimony completely, especially when it comes to stories of sex and class and the intersection between them. Eventually, Allison records, in response to these experiences

and the burgeoning anti-pornography movement, Allison started her own CR group named, with deliberately provocative humor, the Lesbian Sex Mafia.

All of Allison's difficult encounters prefigure tensions in the women's movement that would emerge dramatically in the early 1980's. By far the most dramatic encounter Allison records is the WAP protest at the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality. The conference, which Allison refers to in her essay "Public Silence, Private Terror" as the Barnard Sex Scandal, was titled "Pleasure and Danger: Towards a Politics of Sexuality." It's organizers meant it to explore all aspects of women's sexuality, including those which remain(ed) taboo, such as adolescent sexuality, prostitution and —to the special anger of WAP —pornography and sadomasochism. To prepare for the conference, the participants, who were essentially working to create a new field of feminist thought, had many long discussions in meetings that Carol Vance describes as similar, in tone and style, to CR groups. These proceedings were documented in a volume meant for release at the conference as part of the program.[13]

The Manhattan branch of WAP held fervent protests against the conference, picketing on campus and passing out leaflets about its proceedings and its participants. According to conference participants, including Vance and Allison, the WAP, or women sympathetic to their cause —as in most cases of traumatic events, the facts remain unclear —targeted Allison and a number of other conference participants as perverts who were "dangerous to women." They distributed the targeted women's names and called their employers and the university. The university allowed the conference to proceed, but seized the journal of the pre-conference meetings and refused to allow its distribution. In

the almost wholly pro-WAP coverage that the feminist journal *off our backs* gave to the conference, members of WAP and women sympathetic to their cause argued that WAP and their view-point had been systematically shut out of the conference. What was left, it seemed to the *off our backs* reporters, was practically a celebration of sexual practices that WAP deemed anathema to women: at best a case of false consciousness, at worst a malevolent betrayal of the movement and women in general at a historical moment when the depth and breadth of the crisis of violence against women had just begun to be recognized and addressed.[14]

I have called the Barnard conference a traumatic event: It marked a permanent and violent break in the movement's conception of itself whose ramifications are still felt. In her essay and in interviews, Allison records that many of the targeted women lost their jobs, became suicidally depressed, or had to move away from their homes. Published more than a decade later, her essay also bears witness to the continued urgency of the breach —its original participants, and the generations of young women who follow them, still argue bitterly over both the explicit subjects of the debate (pornography, sadomasochism and other sexual practices) and its many implicit subjects (the place of desire in a political movement, street activism vs. academia, and the contesting analytical frameworks of gender, class, race, and sexuality, just to name a few).

Allison compares her own post-Barnard experience explicitly with her reaction to her struggles with the trauma of child abuse. It is a kind of echo-trauma:

> ...I went through a period of involuntary withdrawal in my relationships that took me right back to when I was first working out my response to childhood incest. It became impossible to let anyone, no matter how trusted, touch me in an intimate

> way, and for almost a year I became completely nonorgasmic. There was a kind of painful irony in being such a publicly recognized sex radical who could not have sex, and who dared not acknowledge that condition until it was past. (*Skin*, 107-8)

Allison's description is a sharp reminder that underlying the deep differences between the conference participants and its protesters was a common pool of shared testimony, often centering on sexual violence: rape, illegal abortions, harassment — and child abuse and incest. In addition to (or because of) the unquantifiable effect of that recently shared testimony, the figure of the sexually abused little girl was prominent in the work of Andrea Dworkin, Catherine Mckinnon, and WAP and their sympathizers. Women who worked in pornography or as prostitutes, or who participated in sadomasochism, were (and still are) portrayed as adult bodies possessed by traumatized little girls. Psychically sick, these women needed to be rescued —*now*, if not sooner, and certainly before questions of pleasure and desire could be addressed. This crisis-driven narrative, like a plot summary that would reduce *Bastard* to a story solely about child abuse, was (is) not untrue, but it was radically incomplete. The Barnard protests pitted would-be rescuers, many of whom were no doubt survivors of abuse themselves, *against* abuse survivors: women like Joan Nestle, Amber Hollibaugh, and Allison herself, who adamantly refused to identify with this limited and pathologizing trauma plot, stubbornly working instead to complicate and expand these stories until they could account for their own sense of their complicated lives and desires.

Thus, though the participants in the Barnard debates may not have suffered from trauma in a strictly clinical sense, the terms of the debate and its intensity were set by

trauma's presence, and its testimony. As is usually the case with trauma narratives, the stakes were very high, and agreed-upon truths were hard to come by. And as is also often the case with trauma, complex individual stories were pitted against a universalized, medicalized narrative.[15] Trauma is marked by its radical indeterminacy. Even its victims can never be certain of their memories, or, as with Bone facing the sheriff's question, of where the story begins and ends or the differences between causes and effects. To become a witness is to share the burden of this indeterminacy. At the same time, as Allison has also shown us in her stories of Bone's would-be rescuers, the presence of trauma calls forth the self-protection of diagnosis, judgment, and action. As Raylene says to the Sheriff, *there is need*, of that there is no doubt. But, devoid of the *pause* in trauma's cycle marked by the attempt to bear witness (rather than to rescue), the politics of crisis, and the simple stories it demands, almost guarantee that action will collapse into traumatic repetition.

National plots and the intervention of the quotidian

As the divisions within the women's movement came to the fore, the Reagan administration was swept into office by an electorate eager to consume neo-conservative rhetoric about a new "morning in America" that would banish the darkness of leftist attacks on its morals. Lauren Berlant has argued that under the Reagan-Bush administrations a public sphere where adult citizens could voice their displeasure with and attempt to influence their national government disappeared. It was replaced by a psuedo-public sphere obsessed with what Berlant calls "intimate things": "pornography,

abortion, sexuality, and reproduction; marriage, personal morality and family values. These issues do not arise as private concerns: they are key to debates about what "America" stands for, and are deemed vital to defining how citizens should act."[16] The radical potential of the feminist tagline "the personal is political" had been usurped and redeployed as its obverse—the total sum of political is the personal—a transformation that not only robs the intimate of its power to trouble the public sphere, but disappears the public sphere entirely.[17] As a result, Berlant argues, Americans are caught up in "…a cartoon version of a crisis in U.S. citizenship" in which "a citizen is defined as a person traumatized by some aspect of life in the United States." In an absurdist caricature of identity-based politics, these citizens can only speak as "*kinds* of people," a predicament which leaves them "attached to and underdescribed" by the categories to which they are assigned.[18] Hacking notes a similar shift in the rhetoric surrounding child abuse. It has become "the worst of private evils," theological rather than historical, and certainly not political.

Just as limiting Bone's identity —or any other abuse survivor's identity —to the story of her abuse insures that the power over her narrative remains in the hands of her perpetrator, the pseudo-public sphere Berlant describes both demands trauma stories (you can't exist without one) and insures that this testimony will have no effect on the people or structures that are creating the trauma —including the national government. This infantilizing structure returns us to the danger of a binary framework for trauma, in which there are only perpetrators and victims: One may speak as a passive, effaced victim without power, or join the perpetrators. And indeed, Berlant goes on to theorize the

nation's obsession with fetuses, infants, children (especially little girls), and infantile adults (her example is Forrest Gump) who represent a dream of malleable pre-citizenship and utopian purity, and must be protected from sexual, messy, violating adults. Such as, for example, the leader of a Lesbian Sex Mafia —or an author who makes her little-girl victim defiantly sexual, a narrative choice that has consistently puzzled and upset *Bastard*'s readers.[19]

Taken to its nightmarish extreme, Berlant's scenario leaves us with a political discourse that is scarcely anything *but* competing stories of trauma, flattened or amplified as needed, so that they may be heard through the ever-increasing cacophony of calls to emergency. We are left with a kind of collapse —the "dead signs and tired plots" that Berlant fears testimony is becoming. Or in the field of child abuse itself, a sense, as Hacking puts it, of "drowning in inconsequential studies" after the "harsh but confident" testimony of the 1970's. This sense may also have fueled recent calls to abandon a "rhetoric of victimhood." But, as I have argued throughout, the problem is not a focus on trauma and testimony per se, but the restriction of that testimony and a too-narrow understanding of trauma itself. The trauma narrative that Allison tries to articulate in *Bastard*, in which *trauma* and *crisis* are not always coupled, in which abuse is also *normal everyday horror* and *everyday life is everyday life even if you are being beaten and raped* invites us to bring the survivor back in from beyond the pale, where evil resides, and into our domestic lives and policies. It asks us to bear witness not simply to the story of an event, repeated until we know its gothic storyline by heart, but the story of a life, of which there is always only one.

To end with, a haunting: trauma, reading and real lives

What then, is the relationship between reading, social action, and real lives? In "Shotgun Strategies," Allison maintains a firm insistence that though her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* "comes out of my life and my beliefs...it is not autobiography, not even [Audre Lorde's] biomythography... What I have taught myself to do is to craft truth out of storytelling" (55). Allison sees her commitment to the fictive as that which allows her to intervene in a canon of American literature that has produced little but caricatures of the rural Southern working poor — that is, of her family. "I have loved my family so stubbornly," she says in "A Question of Class," "that I have resisted every attempt to caricature or stereotype them... I have had to fight broad generalizations from every theoretical viewpoint" (*Skin*, 15). But Allison goes on from her strict claim for *Bastard* as fiction to say:

> My sisters do not remember all of our childhood, and one of the roles I have played in our family is being the one who gives it back to them. A problem that arises with my fiction is that...sometimes my sisters don't know the difference between the story I made up and our lives. What I had to do in the year after I finished my novel was sit down with my little sister and...say, "That page is true. It didn't happen to me, though, it happened to you." And I do not know anything that has been as hard as that. (*Skin,* 55-6)

In the moment that she finds herself having to reconstruct the memories her fiction has undone, Allison finds herself caught between ministering to the private needs of her family and defending them from the public narratives by which they have been so radically, contemptuously caricatured and flattened. Even as she tells the story of her

predicament, one of her sisters is mysteriously effaced — it is only with her "little sister" that Allison performs her act of truth-telling.

Allison's sisters bring flesh to the ghosts that haunt the reader of contemporary fiction based on traumatic events whose victims, perpetrators and witnesses are still alive. They remind us both of the real suffering that will always lie beyond our understanding, and the barely visible lives and memories so easily effaced by fiction when facts remain rare and mutable.

If we learn to believe in the truth crafted from storytelling, do we turn away from the real lives that help to make the story? How might the choices Allison made in her construction of the novel help us to understand how to respond to the real lives that haunt its pages?

Two or Three Things I Know for Sure, the slim volume billed as a memoir, that Allison published after her novel and the performance pieces and essays collected in *Skin*, is dedicated to the sisters whose ghostly presence haunts *Bastard Out of Carolina*.[20] It is rich with photographs of Allison's family, images that promise, like the title, certainty, realness. The blurb on the back of the book promises us that here Allison turns "from fiction to memoir" — that is, she will finally tell us the truth. She tells "the story of the Gibson women" it continues, with "luminous clarity." But the blurb also tells us that "Two or Three Things I Know for Sure" is "a meditation on the meaning of storytelling." That is, it is that thing so dangerous to truth: a theory of storytelling.

On page one, Allison begins with her sisters, but she lets us listen in: " 'Let me tell you a story,' I used to whisper to my sisters...'" On page three she turns to the reader,

"I'll tell you a story and maybe you'll believe me." On the next page, she turns away again, putting us in our place: "Let me tell you a story. If I could convince myself, I can convince you. But you were not there when I began. You were not the one I was convincing. When I began there were just nightmares and need and stubborn determination." By the end of the fifth page, in spite of the fact — or perhaps because she will use "two or three things I know for sure" as a refrain throughout the book, Allison undoes the security of the title for good. Following hard on her description of the seemingly inevitable tragedy and loss that her family has endured for generations, Allison tells us:

> Aunt Dot was the one who said it. She said, "Lord, girl, there's only two or three things I know for sure." She put her head back, grinned, and made a small impatient noise. Her eyes glittered as bright as sun reflecting off the scales of a cottonmouth's back. She spat once and shrugged. "Only two or three things. That's right," she said. "Of course it's never the same things, and I'm never as sure as I'd like to be."

With her eyes linked to both sun and poisonous snake, Allison's aunt is magnificent, dangerous and potent in her clear-eyed uncertainty.[21]

To move away from knowledge rather than toward the mastery of it is a difficult trick for the critic, but it is not unlike what Gayatri Spivak means when she speaks of "unlearning privilege." Perhaps the first way we can begin to honor the ghostly presence of Allison's absent sisters is to admit that we do not know them. It is not enough, to be sure, if activism requires certainty, and it may even seem banal. But for a reader to admit the end of their knowledge is a surprisingly difficult, surprisingly rewarding task, and it is, I would argue, the theoretical basis of Allison's invitation to imagine a response to

real lives.

On the page after the indexed photographs of *Two or Three Things* is a small explanatory note by the author:

> *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* was written for performance in the months following the completion of my novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*. First performed in August 1991...the piece has been performed in a variety of cities and has changed with each production. For publication the work has been substantially revised. The names of most family members have been changed and other characters are composites — creations based on friends, family, and acquaintances.

Finally, absence seems less mutable than presence. Here, as in *Bastard Out of Carolina,* trauma is marked by an absence of a specific kind — the thing that is seemingly present but truly out of reach.

For the reader, Allison's sisters are similarly absent and present. Their presence in Allison's essays seems to promise an alternative to believing in her novel, even as they lend Bone's narrative credence. Their lives appear to be the higher truth of Allison's traumatic fiction, and yet they have little more access to their own traumatic memories than we do. It is in the brief moments that we recognize — with a shock of sudden sorrow — the incontrovertible absence of these real lives, that we can begin to glimpse the truth that Allison offers, and the lives that her sisters, and others unknown but much nearer, continue to live.

[1.] Dorothy Allison, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (New York: Dutton, 1992). All subsequent references to *Bastard* are from this volume and will be noted in the text.

[2.] Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1994), 34. All subsequent references to Allison's essays are from this volume and will be noted in the text as from *Skin*.

[3.] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 2.

[4.] See, for example, Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), which now stands as one of the founding texts of contemporary trauma studies, especially for clinicians. The emphasis on whole or unbroken narratives can be found throughout the book, but Herman's commentary on Janet's conception of reintegrating trauma into a life story is of special interest (37, 41-44). For law's dependence on testimony for the production of truth see Shoshana Felman's "Education and Crisis" in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History,* co-authored by Dori Laub, M.D. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 4-6.

[5.] A classic, if somewhat extreme, example of reviewers' emphasis on *Bastard's* authenticity and the paradoxical tendency of this claim to lead towards the effacement of class can be found in Randall Hackley's Associated Press review, "This Powerful Novel Seems All Too Real" (Oct. 23, 1992, BC Cycle). Hackley's review begins by summing up *Bastard* as "a frightening, damning book about a girl who grows up in a dysfunctional Southern household and is repeatedly abused by her stepfather," and goes on to note that "Dorothy Allison has written such a forceful novel that it's almost unclear where truth ends and fiction takes off" only to make the universalist claim that though "the book is set in the poor South" the setting "is really of no importance: Bone's abuse could be to any child anywhere."

An important exception to this trend is George Garrett's review for the *New York Times* (July 5, 1992, Sunday Late Edition). Garrett's perceptive review pays close attention to the various clichés of Southern and working class narrative Allison succeeds in avoiding and praises her ability to intertwine the story of Bone's abuse with the story of the Boatwrights' struggles. Garrett's review, essentially a rave, ran with a full page picture of Allison and was instrumental in launching her into the mainstream.

However, it is interesting to note a return to the praise of authenticity in the reviews that follow Garrett's, especially in the much later descriptions of *Bastard* that inevitably led off reviews of Allison's second novel, *Cavedweller*. This tendency is perhaps inextricable from the celebration of Allison as a public intellectual and a good

interview, and Allison's own insistence on traveling to promote *Bastard* in person. (She convinced Dutton to spend the money they would have used on advertising as a traveling budget for a series of readings by her.)

[6]The dominance of pop psychotherapeutic discourse ensures a large number of middle class readers now have a specialized vocabulary for diagnosis. My students, for example write all too easily about "cycles of abuse," "co-dependence," "dysfunction" etc. This vocabulary lends no more complexity to their analysis — their impulse is to hand the suffereing subject over to the proper authorities for intervention, even when those authorities remain vague (ie "Bone needs to get some help!" or "That girl needs an education!")

[7]For Allison's comments on this and her complicated struggle with the "real lives" autobiographical aesthetic of the early 1970's women's movement see her essay "Believing in Literature," in *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1994), 165-181.

[8]Dorothy Allison, *The Women Who Hate Me* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1991).

[9]Ian Hacking, "The Making and Molding of Child Abuse," *Critical Inquiry* 17:253-288 (1991), 265-6. This article was later reprinted in a slightly different form as Chapter Four, "Child Abuse" in *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Science of Memory* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995). I have drawn from both.

[10]Hacking, "Making," 267-269.

[11]Hacking, "Making," 273.

[12]Hacking, "Rewriting," 65.

[13]Carol S. Vance, "More Pleasure, More Danger: A Decade After the Barnard Sexuality Conference," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carol S. Vance (London: Pandora Press, 1992), xx-xxi.

[14]*off our backs*, June 1982. See especially "Charges of Exclusion and McCarthyism at Barnard Conference" for a story of the debates, and "Disturbed By Conference" both by Carol Anne Douglas, 1-20, 4-8. See also Dorothy Allison's "Public Silence, Private Terror" in *Skin:Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1994), 101-119.

[15]See Kalí Tal's introduction to *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) for a clear, concise and convincing analysis of why this happens and how, especially 6-10.

[16]Berlant, 1.

[17]Berlant, 176-180.

[18]Berlant, 1. Berlant's "trauma" is not the clinical sort. Rather, it denotes a kind of watered-down therapeutic discourse that has (as in Bill Clinton's notorious Presidential claim to feel-our-pain, or George Bush's insistence that he is "a sensitive guy") replaced serious political discussion. At the same time it functions as an incomplete marker both for the political oppression that continues in the wake of the conservative backlash, and for the arias of doom and destruction sung by mostly male conservative members of the white middle class who, as Berlant puts it, "now have *identities* where before it was just other people who had them." (2) In Berlant's fifth chapter, "The Face of America and the State of Emergency," she traces the ways in which declarations of national emergencies are used against "the adult poor, the nonwhite, the unmarried, the non-heterosexual, and the non-reproductive,"(176) particularly when members of these groups have successfully organized to force their way onto the national scene, not as individual survivors of trauma, nor exceptional "kinds" of people —spokespersons for a group, but as a politically savvy community of adults.

[19]See, for example, Minrose Gwin's "Nonfelicitous Space and Survivor Discourse" in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, Jones, Anne Goodwyn (ed. and introd.) and Donaldson, Susan V. (ed. and introd.). (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

[20]Dorothy Allison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, New York: Plume, 1995.

[21]Allison, *Two or Three Things*, 5.

Chapter Two

Invented Indians:

Tragic Disappearance and the Long Laughter of Survival

First, before anything, a joke

Two Indians walk into a bar in New York City. One of them says to the waitress, "Hey… you ain't seen two Indian men come in here, have you?" And the waitress says, "What? What do you mean? From India?"

> "No, Chess said. "Not that kind of Indian. We mean American Indians, you know? Bows-and-arrows Indians. Cowboys-and-Indians Indians."
>
> "Oh," the waitress said, "that kind. Shoot, I ain't ever seen that kind of Indian."
>
> "We're that kind of Indian."
>
> "Really?"
>
> "Really."
>
> "Hey, Kit," the waitress yelled back at the fry cook and owner of the deli. "Have you seen any Indians in here?"
>
> "What do you mean?" Kit asked. You mean from India or what?"
>
> "No, stupid," the waitress yelled. "Indians like in the western movies. Like Geronimo."
>
> "Oh, I ain't seen none of those around for a long time. I saw a few in a book once. You sure there are still Indians around at all?"
>
> "These two right here say they're Indian."
>
> Kit the fry cook came out to look at the two potential Indians. Chess and Thomas saw a fat man in a dirty white t-shirt, although they weren't sure where the shirt ended and the man began.
>
> "Shit," Kit said. "They don't look nothing like those Indians in the movies. They look Puerto Rican to me."
>
> "Yeah," the waitress said. "They kind of do."
>
> "Do you speak English?" Kit asked.
>
> "Let's get out of here," Chess said to Thomas.
>
> "Yeah, let's go home," Thomas said.
>
> "Hey, you speak good English," Kit yelled after Chess and Thomas.

"Have a good trip back to Puerto Rico." [1]

What does it mean to bear witness as "an Indian on the edge of the 21st Century" to a history of trauma that is hundreds of years old? How is it possible to make one's testimony heard in the cacophony of competing testimony? How to disturb the preordained tragedy of the amazingly flexible romantic narratives of disappearance that lie at the core of our national imaginary, protected by the detritus and carefully constructed carapaces of several centuries? What does it mean to be an American Indian who is not supposed to be there, but keeps on speaking and writing and making jokes anyway?

This chapter is about the long-term survival of trauma and its literary testimony. The problem I examine here is not how to represent the traumatic event, but how to tell, and tell again, in a new guise that incorporates and revivifies the stories that have gone before, the story of the traumatic event's endlessly inventive, stultifyingly repetitive aftermath. I begin by exploring the ways in which the reservation, as it appears in *Reservation Blues* and other works by Spokane/Coeur d'lene author Sherman Alexie, is both a place where people live and a physical manifestation of the parallel world created by that national trauma, though it is not itself limited to the traumatic.

Then, tracing the history of the vanishing Indian and his would-be witnesses, I turn to the natural history museum diorama where, as Donna Haraway relates, Indians (among animals and other exotics) are frozen into hyperreal stop-time poses. Indian dioramas educated their spectators, often new immigrants to the United States, in how to

relate to Indians as ethnic curios and a tragically vanquished people. The diorama is a traumatic icon that both helped to produce Indians and Whites, and reflected their increasingly sedimented relations. Following theorist Gerald Vizenor, I use the diorama as a metaphor to capture the challenges outsiders — particularly Whites — face when attempting to bear witness to contemporary Indian stories. Hollywood movies and other popular media have since overtaken the museum in the production of the myth of disappearance. In my final section I look at the ways in which Alexie's satirical embrace of pop culture reveals the Indian as central to American culture. Alexie's rejection of salvage and recovery's logic and his insistence on laughter and hybridity breaks tragedy's grip and shows us what it is like to dream of a way past the diorama while still stumbling around inside it.

I have turned to contemporary Native American literature, and Alexie's work in particular, for clues to the problem of long-term survival and literary testimony because of the staggering difficulty of the contemporary American Indian author's task: to write the story of long-term Indian survival requires unwriting America's national story. The Indian is both firmly embedded in America's story as an icon and, through the myth of the tragic disappearing Indian, just as firmly effaced as a living being. Alexie tackles this challenge by refusing to keep a straight face. In his novels, short stories and poetry, irony and traumatic memory coexist in a kind of dialectic of survival, often overlapping or underlying one another. The joke above, from his novel *Reservation Blues*, is one of many little bits of side business that derail the insistent forward movement of the novel's plot. In fact, it's not a novel that believes in progress or straight lines of any kind --

neither does the rest of Alexie's work. Ironic schtick is one of its primary modes. The other is the lyric intensity of memory. Dreams and stories overwhelm Alexie's characters, sending them back to scenes of individual, tribal, and national trauma or — and perhaps this would constitute a third mode if it weren't so rare — odd moments of not quite utopic possibility, imaginative moments of grace that dream of reaching past both trauma's repetitions and history's ironies.

In the bar joke, for example, the series of historical traumas underlying the comic mis-recognitions include Columbus' original conquest and misnaming, the postcolonial legacy of British imperialism, the partition of India, the U.S. colonization of Puerto Rico, and the forced dislocations of the United States' Operation Peter Pan, just to name a few. And then there is Chess' opening question, "...You ain't seen two Indian men come in here, have you?" Someone is missing, someone is lost, a friend is in danger. And not just any friends but two thirty-year-old reservation Indians who have survived years of the aggressive federal Urban Relocation programs that aimed for total assimilation and the end of the reservations only to be lost, now, tonight, in New York City.[2]

To get her question answered, Chess can't talk history. Instead she has to reach for the most popularly available free-floating signifiers of Indianness. The call and response between the Indians and whites in the scene is a litany of these: bows-and-arrows, cowboys-and-indians, indians-in-hollywood-westerns, Geronimo, indians-in-books, and of course, the disappeared indian, indians-who-are-no-longer. *Someone is missing.* Though the waitress and the cook recognize all the signifiers, the litany still doesn't work the way its supposed to, precisely because all of the figments of Indianness

lead to the last item in the list, tragic disappearance. "I saw some in a book once," says Kit, the fry cook, "You sure there are still Indians around at all?" In New York, a city filled with immigrant refugees, Thomas and Chess have no identity — they are swallowed up by the other histories of displaced, dark-skinned Others. After the friendly, well-meaning waitress and cook obliterate their identities, compliment them on their English, and wish them a good trip back to the island, Thomas and Chess literally disappear from view. "Let's go home," says Thomas, back to the reservation, a different kind of island, where they can literally *be*.[3]

With this joke and others, Alexie puts white and other non-Indian readers on notice that looking at and listening to contemporary Indians might be more difficult than it seems. This is one of trauma's effects on its bystanders: The evidence, even the survivors themselves, might be right in front of our eyes, and still we are unable — or refuse — to see them.[4] For cultural critics the problem is even more complex. Insofar as this project falls under the rubric of American cultural studies, it is haunted by the legacy of early ethnographers and anthropologists whose salvage missions, as I will discuss below, relied on the idea of culture as a means of separating authentic Indian ways from inauthentic Indian peoples who were doomed to disappear. This confusion of *rescue* with *recognition* accidentally (or otherwise) promoted the crisis of disappearance it meant to salve. Along with the missionaries whose salvations demanded heathens (and the idea of heathens) to convert, the government workers who required wards of the state, and others less obvious, including those who assumed it was too late for rescue and moved on to commemoration,[5] these would-be witnesses will serve as both bad example

and rich source of information for mapping out the difficulties of witness.

After this, and before, and all during my exploration of the knotty problem of how to write contemporary literary testimony about the centuries-old national trauma of genocide will be the joke. For neither austere solemnity nor gothic melodrama are equal to the task of bearing witness to traumatic survival and its literary testimony. This is especially true for white readers, who must learn to abandon humorless, narcissistic poses of guilt and heroic rescue. Even when Alexie is not asking his white readers to laugh at themselves, he reminds us that we're probably missing the joke altogether — that sometimes to disappear is to be at the center of things: "…I load my books with stuff, just load 'em up. I call them 'Indian trapdoors.' You know, Indians fall in, white people just walk right over them." [6]

Survival, trauma, and the reservation

> *Indian boy drives his car through the rail, over the shoulder*
> *Off the road, on the rez, where survivors are forced to gather*
> Sherman Alexie, preface song to Chapter 9, *Reservation Blues*

Having said that this is a chapter about survival and its literary testimony, I must emphasize that the line between the representation of a traumatic event and a story of the survival of that event is a thin and broken one. Indeed, debates over whether trauma is located in an event (or set of events) or whether it consists of the shock of survival itself

are far from resolved. This confusion is uneasily contained by the clinical term most commonly used to diagnose the symptoms of those suffering from trauma: "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" (PTSD). The "post," which would signify the trauma as past, pulls against the "traumatic" which has turned an event — which can only be known as traumatic by its effects — into a disorder.[7]

For the survivor of trauma, the contradictory trauma of survival often manifests itself not simply as "survivor guilt" (a feeling of "Why am I alive and not others?"), but as a more complicated feeling that she or he *should no longer be alive*. Clinician Judith Lewis Herman records survivors who report feelings of *passing* as alive, or who say, paradoxically, "I am dead," insisting on this truth even as they walk among us in the broad daylight, like ghosts who cannot rest.[8] Trauma is, by definition, an irreparable rupture of the survivor's/community's world view, a permanent change. But more uncannily, trauma may also be characterized as a parallel moment that, though it often eludes conscious memory, continues to happen. Endlessly, the continuing event disrupts sleep and life in the form of dreams, fragmented but overwhelming images, emotional storms or disassociation, and the bodily memory of heat, cold, taste, texture, and pain. These disruptions wreak havoc on any faith the survivor has that he or she has "moved on" — traveled forward on that imaginary, progressive, unidirectional line into the future. Sometimes, the traumatic scene becomes more vivid, simply more *real* than the imitation of life that follows.

As I have already begun to discuss in my first chapter, literary testimony shows us the way the long-term effects of this doubled reality make themselves felt in everyday

life. In Alexie's world, for example, the presence of death and destruction is no longer effaced by the quotidian. Instead, every daily act or encounter seems to point back — or rather, simply at — the historical/ongoing trauma of genocide, as though it were the only referent and all acts of living merely signifiers of its presence. (Though, as I will discuss below, this does not necessarily mean all acts of living become tragic or despairing.) In this way, for both Allison and Alexie, trauma ceases to be a rupture of the quotidian and becomes the quotidian itself — a landscape rather than a scar in the landscape.

For Alexie, it is the reservation that marks both a concrete, quotidian landscape and an uncanny, intangible landscape of communal trauma, one that he shows us is simultaneously impossible to hold on to and impossible to leave behind. In his work, the reservation is a real place (the town of Wellpinit, "population variable," on the Spokane Indian Reservation, 41.7 miles from Spokane, Washington), a literary landscape (like Spoon River, or Hannibal) and a metaphoric space that exceeds its name-place boundaries to become, like *homeland*, a space of memory full of longing, nostalgia, shame, righteous anger, and desire.[9] In *Reservation Blues,* though Thomas Builds-the-Fire and his love, Chess Warm Water, are from different reservations, they share a common psychological landscape of loss.[10] The reservation is crucial, for Alexie, in constructing the identity of an *Indian*, a word he uses deliberately and repeatedly, pointing toward the mis-recognition of the highly diverse tribes that now claim, through trauma and survival, this common name**.**

While there are serious historical differences between the stories of America's poor Southern whites and the Indian Nations, Dorothy Allison's Greenville County and

Alexie's Wellpinit share a sense of being trash, something that has been used up and thrown away; something that *should no longer be here* and yet continues on (like a ghost). Like *white trash*, the word *reservation* and in many cases, the geography of what is reserved, speaks quite literally to the experience of being "marginalized," just as H.U.D. houses and a diet of government commodities speak to the provisioned and provisional life of those living on reserves. Living in this taxed physical and psychological space takes its toll in ways that are not always quantifiable. Both Allison and Alexie have noted their own near-deaths and how these relate to their activism and their call to bear witness. They have also recorded the high numbers of family members and close friends they watched die as they grew up, most through "accidents" or "self-destruction" peculiarly endemic to their respective home places. [11]

Like trauma itself, which isolates its survivors by placing them beyond the pale of "normal" human experience, these home places are considered beyond the pale of "normal America" even as normal America continually turns to them to define itself. In anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's *A Space By the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other America",* when Stewart visits Hopi and Navajo reservations, she is reminded of the West Virginia hills where she conducted the book's fieldwork: "Part of the resemblance," she writes, "was in those places here too, not unlike all those "trashy" pockets of life across the American cultural landscape from backwoods Maine to "Okie" California — the places piled high with collections of used-up things still in use, the chairs outside where people just set, the distant smell of food cooking across the expanse of barking dogs."[12] The details Stewart chooses to represent these "trashy places"

resonate deeply with representations of reservation life from a variety of native authors: the relentless catalogues of furniture, trash, and plastic piled up by Louise Erdrich; Gerald Vizenor's omnipresent reservation dogs; Sherman Alexie's characters, who, more often than not, meet each other while "just setting" on the sidewalk or the porch, waiting (for what they're not sure); the moment in Alexie's *Reservation Blues* when reservation visitors are told they can find Thomas Builds-the-Fire's house by turning left when they smell frybread. This is the homeland where, as in my epigraph from Alexie's song, "survivors are forced to gather." *Used up things still in use.*

Yet Stewart also sees that the reservations, like the hills ."..have the quality of a place-in-itself squeezed into the wide expanses of an American no-man's-land. There is the quality of a doubly occupied place — a place that was taken over and surrounded by an occupying force and then resettled to occupy THIS place HERE with a force of its own."[13] Paradoxically held fast by a past that is no longer accessible, the people who live on the reservation nonetheless continue to revise that past and to insist upon its contemporary relevance, to remember the dead and to demand justice for the living. If the reservation is a shadow of a lost homeland created through trauma and force, for many of the people living within its bounds, it is also the thing that comes to seem *most real*, factual evidence of an ongoing trauma whose story is threatened daily by erasure. But re-occupying an occupied space makes for an always uneasy doubled existence where *home* is superimposed upon and becomes inextricable from *occupied territory*. Like Allison who, in spite of suffering at their hands, continues to "love her family so well" that she resists "broad generalizations from every viewpoint," the Indians on

Alexie's reservation live in a bind that pulls against the normative definitions of home as a stronghold against danger or a facade concealing evil within. For Alexie and Allison home is both the site of trauma, and territory that they refuse to abandon. To be sure, to stay in such a home is to stay in enemy territory. But to leave, is to leave *home* behind.

For the Indians on Alexie's reservation, as *tribe* sidles up to *fellow prisoner* the possibility of being a citizen in a national homeland all but disappears. The federal government recognized the sovereignty of Indian nations in the same breath that it declared their total subjugation and inevitable eradication. The survivor's undeniable wish to forget catastrophes of the past, or to remember them selectively, rewriting and re-imagining that past, exists in tandem with an oppressive national forgetfulness — one promoted by popular culture as well as federal law and policy— that assumes the troublesome Indian nation within the "real" nation will eventually disappear into the mythic mists of national origin. In Alexie's short story "Family Portrait," the reservation disappears altogether under these tensions, in a welter of collective half-remembrances, retellings and TV:

> I don't know where the years went. I remember only the television in detail. All the other moments worth remembering became stories that changed with each telling, until nothing was aboriginal or recognizable.
>
> For instance, in the summer of 1972 or 1973 or only in our minds, the reservation disappeared. I remember standing on the front porch of our HUD house, practicing on my plastic saxophone, when the reservation disappeared.
>
> *Finally*, I remember thinking, but I was six years old, or seven. I don't know for sure how old; I was Indian. Just like that there was nothing beyond the bottom step. My older brother told me he'd give me a quarter if I jumped into the unknown. My twin sisters cried equal tears; their bicycles had been parked out by the pine trees, all of it vanished.[14]

The occupied reservation, created by broken contracts and lost wars, is marked by the

unlikeliness of its own continuance — the narrator is unsurprised when it finally gives way to complete absence. His *finally* is a sigh of relief. Now his reality matches the relentless narrative of disappearance that television tells again and again. The effect of the reservation's disappearance on the narrator's family is ambiguous — the sisters cry for their lost bicycles, not for the missing landscape. In fact, the story of the disappearing reservation is only an example of a larger problem — the narrator's tenuous memory. He loses years, events, his own age. It is a tenuousness, he tells us, that is both inseparable from and subsumed by what it is to be — not aboriginal, there is no authentic original here, no recovery of tradition — but *Indian*: a collection of half-remembered, thrice-told stories, the white noise of the television always blaring in the background (showing, as we will see below, all the old John Wayne movies).

In *Reservation Blues*, Alexie shows us the double of the tenuous, disappearing reservation — a reservation that will never disappear, a kind of trapdoor into the troubled 19th-century moment of its creation. This moment, and therefore the reservation itself, continues to haunt Indians even when they try to leave it behind. When storyteller Thomas Builds-the-Fire's All-Indian Band, Coyote Springs, flies to New York City to audition for a recording contract:

> ... the reservation remained behind. It never exactly longed for any Indian who left, for all those whose bodies were dragged quickly and quietly into the twentieth century while their souls were left behind somewhere in the nineteenth. But the reservation was there, had always been there, and would still be there, waiting for Coyote Springs' return from New York City. Every Indian, every leaf of grass, and every animal and insect waited collectively. (*Reservation*, 220)

The waiting is anticipatory and slightly menacing, rather than welcoming: a "you'll be

back," rather than a "we'll always be here for you." The Indians who leave become soulless bodies, "dragged" forward in time — hardly the hopeful progressive journey Coyote Springs hopes to take. The explicit mark of the nineteenth century strains against an equally explicit timelessness ("the reservation was there, had always been there, and would still be there...") that belongs to the endless present tense of the traumatic toward which other events are always leading up to, or going on from.

The menace, and the construction of time on the reservation as circular and static, grows clearer as the passage continues:

> The old Indian women dipped wooden spoons into stews and stirred and stirred. The stews made of random vegetables and commodity food, of failed dreams and predictable tears. That was the only way to measure time, to wait. Those spoons moved in slow circles. Stir, stir. The reservation waited for Coyote Springs to fall into pieces so they could be dropped into the old women's stews. (*Reservation*, 220)

That was the only way to measure time, to wait. Those spoons moved in slow circles. Stir, stir. This is trauma time, endless repetitions in a stew of inevitable failure, immovable against the illusion of a future, an alternative, a somewhere else: *Just like that there was nothing beyond the bottom step. My older brother told me he'd give me a quarter if I jumped into the unknown.*

In Alexie's work the reservation manages to occupy, as Stewart put it, "THIS space HERE" only by accepting the concrete geographical boundaries of homeland territory as real. When Thomas Build-the-Fire's all-Indian rock band, Coyote Springs, jumps off the reservation and heads off into the unknown of the rock-and-roll life, Seattle, and finally New York City, the trauma time of the reservation pursues them in

their travels through daydreams and nightmares and broken machinery. The characters, the plot, and even the van that carries the characters of *Reservation Blues* are forever drifting off, zoning out, getting lost in the space between the half-remembered histories that haunt them, and a present day life that seems only half-real.[15] Coyote Springs' movement off the reservation reanimates the Indian Wars of the past. They are pursued/tempted by George Wright and Phil Sheridan, who in 1992 are talent scouts for Calvary Records, but who in 1858 led a series of devastatingly bloody campaigns against the Spokane. Fighting off these ghosts, or talking back to the people in their dreams, the characters' actions often appear hysterical, illogical.

However, the restless ghosts of Sheridan and Wright suggest that though Alexie's reservation is a haunted, traumatic, ghostly place, filled with the white noise of the television set, it is also a landscape that actively haunts the center that has pushed it aside. Philip Deloria's *Playing Indian*, a history of white fascination with and imitation/invention of Indian culture, considers weekend visits to the reservation and other modern and post-modern forms of playing and consuming Indian in light of a primarily white, male American center's overlapping searches for national identity, personal identity, authenticity, and realness. In many ways, this search for realness is simply another version of treating Indians as noble savages, children of nature who represent an earlier and truer version of being human. But it also partakes of a dynamic familiar to other communities whose oppression became key to marking the identity of the white male, particularly African Americans: The perpetrator turns to his victim with desire, a longing for the fetishized object he himself has created, adopting not only style,

art, and other tangible manifestations of "culture" made visible by his own insistence on remaining unmarked, but the more intangible (and more desirable) "soul" (in the case of African Americans) or "spirit" (in the case of Indians).[16]

In his short story, "Indian Country," Alexie suggests that what tourists misread as spirituality is actually the silence between traumatic repetitions.[17] Low Man Smith, an urban Indian who has resisted his relatives' suggestions that he visit the reservation more often, sees the reservation as "a monotonous place — a wet kind of monotony that white tourists saw as spiritual and magic. Tourists snapped off dozens of photographs and tried to capture it — the wet, spiritual monotony — before they climbed back into their rental cars and drove away to the next reservation on their itineraries." (*Toughest*, 122) After the tourists leave, the monotony continues for "months, sometimes years" until "eventually" terrible violence and reciprocation ensue. The tourists' confusion links trauma, spirituality and realness together in the carefully bounded space of the reservation, a feat of nostalgia made possible only by an absolute lack of threat. Stewart notes that places like the reservation which are "devastated by history" are made to "retain the marks and memories of the past while in the suburbs the sheer timelessness of the straight line of progress spreads like oak wilt from house to house."[18] Refusing/unable to "move on," the residents of the reservation are both excoriated for their stubborn attachment to the past, and envied for their contact with a notion of the real. Deloria, for example, recalls running into white hippies, suburban refugees from progress, who tried to invent a more authentic life by setting up an "Indian commune" whose name had a "faux-Indian ring... Rainbow, maybe, or Green Wood." Now, he

points out, these names bring to mind the suburban tract housing the hippies were escaping as though linguistics could produce the patina of authenticity required for *home*.[19] The "pieced together, re-membered places" like the reservation "bear the weight of a homeland while the 'master planned communities' at the center of things encase themselves in the picture perfect simulacra of homeyness and memory."[20]

I will discuss below how museums and other pop cultural productions help "the communities at the center of things" to produce an elaborate carapace of narratives that work to freeze in place the still open wound of the genocide of the American Indian. For now I want simply to mark the connection between a powerful and confused longing for *home*, and the white recognition and co-optation of intangible "Indianness." As we will see below, it is a longing that has, since very early in the United States' history, been entangled in both literature and nationalism. For non-survivors to take seriously the possibility of bearing witness to the literary testimony of Indian genocide, we must take into account both the power of this longing, and the rapidity with which the nostalgia that it produces turns us away from a traumatic history in which individual people are allowed to have what sociologist Avery Gordon calls "complex personhood."[21] If it was difficult to see, in my discussion of Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, how the intimate suffering of sexual abuse might be enmeshed in — or itself constitute — a national trauma, in this chapter it may become difficult to see the survivors to whom Alexie bears witness as anything *but* national. Real-life geographical locations can't help but slip into the nether space of metaphor; individual suffering can't help but slip into an idea of the tribal that can't help, as Deloria's study shows us, but run headlong into a white, primarily male

American longing for identity and a resultant system of signifiers that carry along in their wake everything from legal tender to civil disobedience from the American Revolution to now.

Invented Indians and the diorama of tragic disappearance

> All of the Indians must have tragic features: tragic noses, eyes, and arms.
> Their hands and fingers must be tragic when they reach for tragic food.
> Sherman Alexie, "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel"

In *Playing Indian,* Deloria tells the story of one Lewis Henry Morgan, a lawyer who formed a fraternal society to promote the creation of a truly American literature, one that would make possible a national identity abroad and an American imagination at home. In 1844, with its singularly unproductive membership in decline, Morgan renamed his society and shifted its focus from the production of literature to the documentation and imitation of the Iroquois.[22] The new society's creed was based on a narrative of disappearance and replacement. During its induction ceremonies its members met the ghosts of Iroquois (played by longtime members) who had vanished from the land. These disappeared Indians returned just long enough to pass on to the New Americans the sacred mission of replacing them by learning their ways and producing new native products. As Morgan gathered more and more information to make the society's rituals authentic his mystical attachment to the American wilderness and its Indians increased until he gave up on the society altogether and traded his attempts to foster an American literature for full-time American Indian studies. At this

point, Deloria notes, he ran into a now familiar paradox:

> Taking Indian disappearance seriously, feeling bad about it, and being in contact with native people pointed Morgan to what later scholars would call salvage ethnography. Salvage ethnography — the capturing of an authentic culture thought to be rapidly and inevitably disappearing — has from the beginning been haunted by fractures of logic. The salvage workers are required to believe in both disappearing culture and the existence of informants knowledgeable enough about that culture to convey worthwhile information.[23]

Morgan resolved his sincere respect and interest in Indians with his fierce longing for the establishment of national homeland that required their disappearance by separating "Indian ways" — or what would later come to be called *culture* — from the living Indians whose memories and traditions he worked to record. The separation was made possible by the notion of authenticity. Only pre-contact Indians were truly authentic. This left the ethnographer (and later the anthropologist and the museum curator) in the enviable position of being the only one able to piece together the fragments of contemporary memory he collected from the authentic Indians' descendants. The result is what theorist and writer Gerald Vizenor has called *the invented Indian.* Inaccessible, always just shy of perfection, the invented Indian begins in longing and literature and ends in science. He is lit by both the golden glow of nostalgia and the bright light of empiricism.

And he is tragic. He is tragic in the classic sense, because the story of the disappearing Indian has one ending and one ending only: unnatural death made natural and inevitable by the story that creates him. In this story, even if the invented Indian's descendants are still alive, they live in the shadow of the invented Indian's authenticity

— lost culture, lost homeland, lost context. Their authenticity is judged by how close, or far, from this invention their daily lives are.[24] Thus, in the epigraph from Alexie that begins this section, the Great American Indian Novel must feature tragic Indians — because there are no other kind. It is also, as Deloria points out, the victor's response to his defeated foe. Paternalistic federal policies — government grants and subsidies, the formation of the reservations, housing, job training, urban relocation — were deeply informed by the persistent belief that Indians would soon disappear.

Before the triumph of Hollywood it was the exhibition hall, and the more permanent museum, with their dioramas of ancient cultures and their collections of bones and artifacts funded — and sometimes collected — by wealthy capitalists (or their wives and heirs) who educated mainstream, often illiterate, Americans, including huge numbers of recent immigrants, in social Darwinism and disappearance. In the museum, invented Indians were posed among natives and animals from other "stone age" cultures. At the exhibition halls patrons were offered the privilege of comparing live native curios with the wonders of modern civilization. In both instances, spectators were invited to find in these particular versions of the past both a refreshing (if brief) escape from the stresses of contemporary life and reassuring evidence of its inevitable progress. Educational, entertaining, civilizing, the exhibitions gave American citizens — especially those who were recently arrived — a chance to consume other cultures, thereby implicitly proving their own culture's superiority.[25]

In *The Predicament of Culture*, one of several books in which anthroplogist James Clifford examines the contradictions and ethical dilemmas of anthropology's past,

Clifford explores how the partnership between anthropology and museums transformed the objects of collected culture into commodities, mapping their travels from sacred fetish, to scientific artifact, to art object, to mass- produced kitsch.[26] Clifford's schema offers one way of understanding the habits of readers who approach ethnic and other marginalized literature, particularly Native American literature, as though it were an intimate guided tour of a secret place (fetish to artifact), while simultaneously decrying its inability to satisfy "universal" standards of aesthetics (art object). The literary marketplace's desire to mass produce profitable narratives creates in turn a template that, like the marketplace for traumatic testimony, both encourages and selects for stories told within such narrow bounds that they can be faked.[27] The invented Indian and his spectator overdetermine the narrative intentions of contemporary indigenous authors, reshaping even the most sacred intentions into blasphemy.[28]

The writings of Gerald Vizenor, one of the first Native critics and writers to embrace postmodernism, support this framework. In his introduction to *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Literatures,* Vizenor, a self-proclaimed trickster and mixedblood Anishinaabe, argues that readers trained — consciously or not — to respond to all that is Indian with an ethnographic eye have produced a literary criticism based on the literal and the structural. Assuming that authors have kept faith with mimetic realism (and castigating them for inauthenticity when they do not), Vizenor argues that critics have treated Native American Literature as a set of native informant reports, often grouping them, in surveys of the field, by type and category. Vizenor wages a comic war on the invented Indian. Rejecting romantic ideas

of purity, authenticity and nostalgia-infected traditions in favor of the hybridity typified by the "mixedbloods and mongrels" of the reservation, Vizenor embraces postmodernist discourse as a means of both reading Native American literature and describing Native American experience.[29] It is from his work that I take the metaphor of the diorama to designate both the origins and the stultifying effects of the invented Indian and his relationship to anthropology and the museum.

This metaphorical diorama, like Alexie's reservation, has both a physical and a psychic reality. It is a three-dimensional (four, if you count time as a dimension) version of the plots-in-waiting I discussed in Chapter One: not simply a narrative that one finds oneself swept up in, but a whole world in which food, gestures, accents, and all the poses of daily life are contained, held together by the magnetic force of dualities: perpetrator/victim, Indian/white, past/present. The museum diorama's distillation of ethnographic reports on primitive peoples emphasizes both the static, severely limited nature of these poses, and what Donna Haraway calls the "hyperreality" that they produce. Like the taxidermist's beautifully posed animals, Indians caught in a diorama seem to give non-natives the chance to see close up what Indians really are, confirming the stories we thought we knew about them even as their realness causes us to forget who it was that posed them in the first place, and who paid the taxidermist's salary.[30] The notion of the diorama also perfectly captures the confusing mixture of the metaphorical and historical that dogs any attempt to engage with the story of Native Americans in the United States. For even at its most horrifyingly literal — the museum's collection and posing of bones, the exhibition hall's display of live human beings "collected" in their

native lands for the purpose — the real bodies in the diorama have already been consumed — like Lewis Henry Morgan's Iroquois — by the literary.[31]

If the reservation is a physical manifestation of the ongoing trauma implicit in traumatic survival, then the diorama is the federally approved simulacra of that trauma. Like traumatic memory, the diorama is repetitive, static, iconic. But unlike traumatic memory it does not signify a previously unimaginable break in a world view — it *is* the world view, in this case the foundation of a national origin myth. As is the case with both trauma and traumatic memory, people find themselves snatched up suddenly into the diorama's roles when they think they are beyond them or have gotten past them — Alexie shows us this again and again in *Reservation Blues* as everyday transactions fade and dissolve into ongoing wars. (Even the kind and well-meaning, like the cook and the waitress in New York, find themselves animated by the diorama's active ignorance.) But unlike trauma, the diorama offers no possibility of unique testimony. The only heroics possible are the heroics it has already decided upon, both noble and savage.

The diorama of tragic disappearance is diabolically effective at containing the trauma of genocide and long-term survival marked by the reservation. It turns again and again to the trauma but ignores its survivors, holding their bodies in a static pose. It makes a fetish and a commodity of a wound which it assumes is no longer available. It confuses historicizing with cauterizing. It memorializes the trauma to make certain it is over. It presents an endless series of melodramas and gothic returns that rush past the story of a particular tribe or native person to a moral about white savagery and regret. No matter how many Indians are on the scene, the primary subject of the diorama is always a

white person, usually a man, even when he isn't actually in the scene. In fact, Alexie himself suggests that the diorama of disappearance eventually, like Morgan, replaces even the invented Indian with a white man playing an Indian. In "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel," one of Alexie's many riffs on the diorama of disappearance, he traces the most desirable racial mix for the hero from a "half-breed...preferably from a horse culture" to the best, white people who "carry an Indian deep inside themselves. Those interior Indians are half-breed/and obviously from horse cultures..." The ultimate result: "In the Great American Indian novel, when it is finally written/all of the white people will be Indians and all of the Indians will be/ghosts." [32]

Testifying and the diorama

It should be clear by now that the dynamics of trauma, especially as they are manifested through the diorama, make the project of witness difficult. This is true for those who would testify as well. The invented Indian is not only an icon that effaces and occludes Indians' identities, but an ambiguously desirable figure who offers cultural power. In *Playing Indian* Deloria speaks of the subtlety of the interchanges between whites and Indians who consciously mirrored white notions of Indianness in order to both gain that power and to attempt to reconfigure these notions in ways that would profit living Indians.[33] By the 1960's and 70's, Deloria notes, native people involved in the American Indian Movement and other political activities had begun to redeploy the rhetoric of disappearance that had once been the sole province of anthropologists. Both by using and revising old ethnographic texts, Indians began to consciously reclaim and

revive old traditions, a trend that culminated in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), which allowed tribes to sue museums and land developers that had collected sacred tribal objects and tribal bodies or had built on sacred grounds.[34] Parallel to these political activities was the emergence of a new wave of Native American literature, much of which documented the individual's or tribes' search for lost traditions and re-imagined old ways. The ties between ethnographic and literary recovery work have been strong. D'arcy McNickle and the late Michael Dorris, for example, were first anthropologists — anthropology has continued to be an academic discipline practiced by, as well as on, Indians.

But neither reclamation work nor the advancement of modern Indians into the ranks of mainstream citizenship and the professions that produced the invented Indian are sufficient for testifying to the daily effects of the diorama. The degree to which popular culture had fetishized and refined the invented Indian and his ways makes escaping him nearly impossible. In "Indians on the Shelf," Michael Dorris opens his essay with two anecdotes that richly reflect the difficulties of trying to live outside the diorama, both of which also illustrate that the invented Indian is one America's most popular cultural exports:

> While on my way to do fieldwork in New Zealand several years ago, I stopped in Avarua, capital of the Cook Islands. To my tourist's eye its was a tropical paradise right out of Michner: palm trees, breadfruit and pineapples, crashing surf, and a profusion of flowers. Most people spoke Maori, and traditional Polynesian music and dance were much in evidence; there was no television, one movie theatre, one radio station, and few private telephones. [35]

Dorris begins the passage as an anthopologist on vacation —he rejoices in the

authenticity of Avarua, its native traditions and the absence of trappings of modernity. Then, as an American tourist, he has the imperial visions of James Michener's *South Pacific* dancing — seemingly unselfconsciously — in his head. But when, like any other tourist, Dorris goes shopping at the local souvenir stand for a memento of his escape from modernity, he runs into a different narrative altogether:

> There were, of course, gift shops, aimed primarily at people like myself who wanted to take with them some memento of days spent sitting in the sun, eating arrowroot pudding and smelling frangipani in every breeze. And so I browsed, past the Fijian tapa cloth, past the puka shell necklaces, past the coconut oil perfume, and came face to face with an all-too-familiar sight: perched in a prominent position on a shelf behind the cash register was an army of stuffed monkeys, each wearing a turkey-feather imitation of a Sioux war bonnet and clasping in right paw a plywood tomahawk. "The Indians" had beaten *this* Indian to Rarotonga.

No longer simply a tourist or an anthropologist, Dorris' encounter turns him into "*this* Indian." Coming from the U.S., where monkeys have traditionally signified Blackness as a jungle animality hailing from a tropical imagined Africa, Dorris may have been particularly startled by this particular variation on Indian simulacrae, but he doesn't comment on this. Instead, he does a quick ethnography of this particular tourist commodity: "The salesperson replied to my startled question that, yes, indeed, these simian braves were a hot item, popular with tourist and native alike. She herself, she added with a broad smile, had played cowboys and Indians as a child." [36]

Dorris ends his first anecdote there, with the picture of him confronting that native smile, and moves on to his second anecdote, where he plays cultural exchange host to "a young man from Zaire who was spending the summer at Dartmouth College to students who would travel the next winter in Kenya on a foreign study program." Unlike

the Rarotonga natives, the young man is worldly, cosmopolitan. He speaks "very little English, a good deal more French, and three East African languages." Nevertheless, he is "homesick for his tiny village," spurred to nostalgia by the familiar flavors of the chili Dorris serves him for dinner. Sitting at the dinner table the men, Dorris tells us, "compared tribes, his and mine." The guest listens with "rare appreciation" to Dorris' recordings of southwestern Indian music and confesses he has never met a "'real' Indian" before.

Unlike Dorris' trip to the Cook Islands, this narrative suggests a greater chance of stepping outside the diorama. Dorris and his guest are highly educated world travelers. True, they are nostalgic for the tribal lives of which they speak, but it is a well-informed nostalgia rooted in family and intimate memory. Recognizing each other as tribal is not a form of unmasking, as with Dorris' island encounter, but a chance for solidarity and exchange (though the reader hears only about what Dorris shows his guest and not what he learns from him about the "tiny village" in Africa). However, as the exchange continues, Dorris' pleasure is brought up short:

> … he… was interested and curious about every detail. But it was not until I brought out an old eagle-feather headdress, a family treasure, that his eyes lit up with true recognition. Sweeping it out of my hand, and with an innocent and ingenuous laugh, he plopped it on his head, assumed a fierce expression and, patting his hand over his mouth, said "woo woo woo." He, too, in his radioless, roadless, remote village, had played cowboys and Indians; it was part of his culture, and he knew how to behave.[37]

In his first story, Dorris travels on a salvage mission as a native anthropologist, appropriating and transforming the tools of the oppressor, only to find himself caught on

the wrong side of the diorama, staring at the very images he set out to eradicate through recovery and reclamation. In the anecdote above, neither his success as an academic and a member of the middle class, nor his continued connections to his tribe, nor even the sense of equality and friendship with an equally cosmopolitan tribal equal are enough to protect Dorris from this moment when he finds himself reflected in the innocent funhouse mirror of his guest's play — caught, as Vizenor would say, in hard core diorama. The guest knows "how to behave." Dorris does not.

Dorris' feelings about these moments are not easy to interpret. As one of the few Indian contributions to the collection in which the essay appears, a volume titled *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, Dorris' anecdotes serve to illustrate his point about how the absolute pervasiveness of what he calls "Indians as folklore," stories that began when the first European settlers misrecognized the "savages" walking toward them on the beaches of the "New World," makes writing history about and/or simply *recognizing* Indians as such terrifically difficult. Dorris refuses the role of native informant. He portrays himself not as knowing or cynical, but as surprised and bewildered. There is humor here, to be sure, but the joke is on Dorris himself. The rest of his essay is earnest, if bemused in tone. Ultimately, it calls for historians to turn away from pervasive falsehood and toward the "hard, terribly difficult and unpredictable quest" of regarding Indians "as human beings."

The call to grant Indians complex personhood is a call to witness that must both precede and take ultimate precedence over any particular testimony. But how can we take account of the diorama as we do so? We must do so, for, as Dorris shows us, no

matter what advances Indians make in their claims on citizenship and personhood, no matter the sincere interest of those who pay attention to their stories, the diorama remains to surprise both parties into poses they didn't mean to hold. The ironies Dorris records go a long way to explaining Vizenor's embrace of the postmodern as a necessary mode for both Indian literary work and criticism. Facts, better history, even the imagined worlds of literary realism (as his career continued, Dorris himself turned from anthropology and history to literature) attempt to bypass or sidestep the diorama. The Cowboys and Indians go on fighting forever, in their parallel world, waiting for us to stumble into the middle of the fight. The silliness of simian braves and an African playing Indian in a Dartmouth professor's kitchen lead always, relentlessly, as in Alexie's opening joke, to the frozen poses of nostalgia and guilt that cue the myth of tragic disappearance. But Alexie's work also suggests that the way to take the silliness of the diorama seriously without submitting to its power is to turn to the joke.

The long laugh of survival: breaking tragedy's grip

> "You're one of the funny Indians, enit?" Sid asked Low Man. "Always making the jokes, never taking it seriously."
>
> "What is this *it* you're talking about?" asked Low Man.
>
> "Everything. You think everything is funny."
>
> Low knew for a fact that everything was funny. Homophobia? Funny! Genocide? Hilarious! Political assassination? Side-splitting! Love? Ha, Ha, Ha! "Indian Country," Sherman Alexie

Sherman Alexie is a Funny Indian — famously, notoriously so. Before the publication of his first book, Alexie had a stand-up routine and was well known in the

Spokane, Washington, area for his electric, and very funny, poetry readings. Reading through his many interviews, all of them filled with one-liners, carefully honed anecdotes, and provocative jabs at both the white and Indian establishment, it is not difficult to see the connections between his former routine and his current public life. His imposing 6' 2" physical presence has helped to literally make him a poster boy. A profile from the *Men's Journal*[38] blurbed on the back of *The Toughest Indian in the World,* calls Alexie "The world's first fast-talking, wisecracking, mediagenic American Indan superstar."

Since I began working on this project in 1999, Alexie's public presence has exploded, in large part as a result of his successful foray into filmmaking.[39] Being a celebrity Indian and a great interview has garnered him inclusion in Jim Lehrer's "A Dialogue on Race with President Clinton," a special on *60 Minutes*, and most recently, an appearance on *Oprah* (alongside Billy Crystal and the ever-present Maya Angelou).[40] I have regularly fielded calls from colleagues reporting both his appearances and his more outrageous jokes which, they often felt, were a kind of Indian minstrelsy, a charge that has, perhaps inevitably, tainted critical views of his work as well.[41] It is good to remember, then, that Alexie has been castigated for his despair, his "darkness," and his exaggeration of the suffering of Indians, as often as he has been celebrated or denigrated for his wisecracks.[42] The worry over the kind of humor Alexie employs points to a larger dynamic where the scarcity of cultural capital accrued to minority communities and the high stakes of traumatic testimony mean that each story risks becoming the only official story, and is therefore policed from within the community as well as without.

But perhaps my colleagues imagined Alexie enabling a scene something like the one Patricia Williams paints of a faculty meeting about the problem of racist harassment of teachers by students, where her white colleagues recommend the power of laughter to disarm the students and defuse tension:

> My faculty colleagues have urged me not to give the voices of racism "so much power." Laughter is the way to disempower the forces of evil, I am told. But is it racism I am disempowering if I laugh? Wouldn't this betray the deadly seriousness of it all? Laughing purposefully at what is hurtful seems somehow related to a first lesson in the skill of staged humiliation. Racism will thus be reduced to fantasy, a slapstick vaunting of good over evil — except that it is real…[43]

It is as easy to glorify the role of laughter in survival — its power to upset hierarchies, to give power to the weak and deflate the pompous solemnities of the strong — as it is to sentimentalize survivors of trauma as noble saints. Just as literary testimony may only *invite* its readers to bear witness, a joke may not succeed in its subversive intent. It may be misused as license to trivialize or otherwise deflect the subject at hand. It may be misread or simply ignored. It may backfire, as Williams' scenario suggests, and become a joke on its author by flattening the field in which it seeks to intervene into a cartoon. With Williams' admonition in mind I want to avoid any simple celebration of the power of laughter to make survival possible, and to keep in mind just who is laughing at whom, when, and where in the specific examples below. But I also want to suggest that fantasy and slapstick are sometimes precisely the terms upon which the poses of the diorama must be met.

Consider, for example Alexie's short story, "Dear John Wayne." The story's

frame declares it is a "transcript adapted from an interview" in 2052 at the St. Tekawitha Retirement Community, Spokane Washington. In the Q and A that follows, the rather priggish and old-fashioned cultural anthropologist Spencer Cox, Owens Lecturer in Applied Indigenous Studies at Harvard University, and author of over 17 books on the Interior Salish cultures, attempts to question Miss Etta Joseph, originally of Wellpinit reservation, about her career as a fancydancer for, as he puts it, "a serious and profound study on the effect of classical European ballroom dancing on the indigenous powwow — a revolutionary text by the way" (*Toughest,* 193). The interview doesn't go as planned. Etta begins by introducing herself as the "Last of the Spokane Indians": "Q: Really? I had no idea you were the last. A: Well actually I'm not. There are thousands of us. But it sounds more romantic, enit?" She then refuses to play native informant, teasing her interviewer into personal revelations and defensive lies instead. "What's the point of all this?" he asks. "I'm having fun with you," she replies. "Q: Well, if you're not going to take this seriously, I'm afraid I might have to move on. My time is valuable. A: Having fun is very serious" (*Toughest* 192-3).

And in fact, in the space of a few pages of this serious fun, Alexie has skewered the dioramic poses produced by anthropology, academia, the ethnographer's search for authenticity, the myth of the disappearing Indian, and Eurocentricism, in addition to tucking in a few insider jokes.[44] All of these are easy targets, to be sure. Even Spencer knows about them, and he tries to rise above the fray by applying some of his indigenous insider knowledge. "Q: We were participating in a tribal dialogue, weren't we? That sort of confrontational banter which solidifies familial and tribal ties, weren't we? Oh,

how fascinating, and I failed to recognize it. A: What are you talking about?" And so it goes, for a few more pages, pedantry losing out badly to wit, theory suffering by the side of praxis.

Always in a rush to get to the meta, Spencer misses the entrance to the real story, and Etta has to spell it out for him:

> A: I lost my virginity to John Wayne.
> (forty-nine seconds of silence)
> Q: You're speaking metaphorically, of course.
> A: Spencer, I am speaking of the vagina and the penis.
> Q: As metaphors?
> A: Do you know the movie *The Searchers*?
> * * *
> A: … Listen to me. Listen carefully. In 1952, in Kayenta, Arizona, while John Wayne was playing Ethan Edwards, and I was playing a Navajo extra, we fell in love. Him, for the first and only time with an Indian. Me, for the first time with anybody. (*Toughest*, 195)

Spencer's attempt to salvage disappearing native customs leads him unexpectedly to the heart of mainstream American culture. A highly influential classic of American cinema, and the most critically beloved of John Ford's westerns, *The Searchers* is a melodrama about revenge, obsession, sexual jealousy, miscegenation, and rape. It features John Wayne as Ethan Edwards, a racist, misanthropic, Indian-hating Civil War veteran who, still loyal to the Confederacy, lives more or less on the lam out on the frontier. After a murderous band of Comanches kill his brother's family and abduct his niece, he becomes obsessed with finding her — first, in order to rescue her, then, as she reaches puberty, to kill her, because she has been "despoiled" by Scar, the Comanche chief. In interviews, Alexie has called it "the most anti-Indian movie ever made." [45]

Alexie turns the storyline of *The Searchers* inside out and wreaks wicked havoc on Wayne, the stoic icon of white masculinity. The story within the transcript's frame opens by literally and figuratively exposing him:

> "My real name is Marion," said John Wayne as he slid the condom over his erect penis. His hands were shaking, making it nearly impossible for him to properly fit the condom, so Etta Joseph reached down, smoothed the rubber with the palm of her left hand — she was touching John Wayne — and then guided him inside of her…
>
> "Does it hurt?" asked John Wayne, with genuine concern, and not because he was arrogant about being her first lover… (*Toughest,* 196)

Not only do his hands shake when putting on a condom, he prefers Etta on top and begs her to call him Marion while they make love.[46] He weeps whenever he has an orgasm, and is so deeply lonely behind the mask of "John Wayne" that he "floods the desert" with his tears while repeating "Nobody knows me. Nobody knows me."

But it's not just that the real John Wayne — or rather, Marion — is weak or effeminate. Rather, he's a fully evolved feminist man who knows his women as well as he knows his gender theory. When he comes into his trailer on the set to find his sons covered in lipstick and mascara, they're afraid of his reaction, and begin do a little weeping themselves. They beg their father not to hate them "because we're girls." But that's not the way it is at all, Wayne explains: "Oh, sons, you're just engaging in some harmless gender play. Some sexual experimentation. Every boy does this kind of thing. Every man likes to pretend he's a woman now and again. It's very healthy." In fact, he tells his shocked sons, it's something that he likes to do himself, not necessarily dressing up, but closing his eyes and trying to "think like a woman," and to "embrace the feminine" in himself. Wayne's lecture ends with the ultimate tip on pleasing women: "'If

you want to make a woman happy, really happy, there's only one thing you got to do.' 'What, Daddy, what?' 'Listen to her stories.'" (*Toughest*, 203)

For Alexie, growing up in the diorama is part of what makes one a contemporary Indian. The fantasies of popular culture that perpetuate the diorama are his intimate enemies, irrevocably part of his life. His answer to the diorama, in "Dear John Wayne" and other stories, is not simply to turn toward a more complex picture of Indian personhood (as in his portraits of reservation life), nor to simply expose the dioramic fantasies as false (as in the Q and A between Etta and Spencer), but to do both of these and *also* fully claim these fantasies — especially those of pop culture — on behalf of the Indians, invented and otherwise, who lived (and continue to live) at the central sites of their physical and psychic production. His willingness to do so transforms his portrait of John Wayne into something richer and stranger than straightforward satire: Wayne's advice on making women happy could have come out of the mouths of any of Alexie's Indian characters. When Alexie places these words in John Wayne's mouth he announces that, as an American Icon, Wayne is as fully available to Alexie's fantasies as he is to anyone else's.

The fantasy he produces rejects the macho search for vengeance that so fascinates *The Searchers*. "Dear John Wayne" suggests that the cowboys-and-indians diorama for which Wayne worked so hard and was paid so well may have been painful for the cowboys as well as for the indians. It also suggests that both parties may have been captive to the demands of a larger story: riffing off the patriotism that was so strong a part of Wayne's public image, Alexie suggests that "being John Wayne" was specifically

nation-building work, akin to going off to war. Saying goodbye to Etta at the end of production for *The Searchers*, Wayne explains that he's not just leaving her to return to his wife and children: "Yes, my family needs me," he said. "But more than that, my country needs me. They need me to be John Wayne." (*Toughest*, 205)

At the same time, the story establishes Etta — as Wayne's eighteen-year-old lover, and as an old woman — as someone who is both wiser and happier than Wayne, without whitewashing her confusion, her enthrallment to Hollywood and its representatives, and her position in the hierarchies of power outside the circle of her immediate, playful control. Her enormous family suggests both personal and tribal continuance: "I have nine children, thirty-two grandchildren, sixty-seven great-grandchildren, and one great-great-grandchild. I've made my own damn tribe." (*Toughest*, 207) The story leaves Etta surrounded by her family, celebrating the one-hundredth birthday of her twin sons, John and Marion, the legacy of her love affair. It leaves Wayne on his deathbed, weeping into the phone to Etta after twenty years of silence, hoping for forgiveness and unable to speak.

But "Dear John Wayne" is a true Dear John letter — a goodbye to an intimate enemy, a break-up letter to the violent past. The final lines of the story are a prayer of forgiveness, delivered by the anthropologist who, surprisingly, and against his will, has become a witness to Etta's testimony. As is usual when a bystander encounters testimony, he wonders if its speaker is crazy, or lying. He thinks about destroying the tape. But then, haunted, he realizes he can't banish the story, "It didn't matter what he chose to do with her story because the story would continue to exist with or without

him." Instead, he prays to/over/for the fallen icon:

> Inside, an old woman kneeled in a circle with her loved ones and led them in prayer.
>
> Outside, a white man closed his eyes and prayed to the ghosts of John Wayne, Ethan Edwards, and Marion Morrison, that Holy Trinity.
>
> Somebody said nothing and somebody said amen, amen, amen.
>
> (Toughest, 208)

The story remains uninterested in any but the sketchiest kind of realism. The characters remain vibrant cartoons, their lives and their dialogue fantastic. It testifies to the fantasies of dominant culture on its own terms, managing to both wreak comic havoc and recover a certain sweetness at the anxious, violent, White heart of things.

It also diagnoses one of the major sources of that violent anxiety: the fruitless search for white, male authenticity and realness that lies at the roots, as we've seen, of so much Indian play, and this search's intersection, equally familiar, with the maintenance of America's official story about itself. For Alexie, the policing around poses of gender and sexuality are intimately connected to the poses of the diorama. His fascination with the way the norms of gender and sexuality line up with whiteness and the long-term effects of Native American genocide run throughout *The Toughest Indian in the World* (the collection in which "Dear John Wayne" appears). As he continues his exploration of these themes in other stories in *Toughest Indian*, the campiness of "Dear John Wayne's" pop icon play gives way to an explicit engagement with queer lives and culture as Alexie follows the notion of false authenticity into the heart of Indian country, dismantling not only John Wayne, but the icons of Indian machismo, too.

As Alexie finds his way toward a model of masculinity that eschews the

narrowest definitions and most solemn poses of the warrior and the patriarch, and takes up instead the poses of the storyteller, the trickster, and the fool, he also finds his way into stories of urban and assimilated Indians, postmodern Indians, Indians between the reservation and the city. He bears witness to stories of contemporary survival that fall far outside the purview of the cowboys-and-indians diorama where the Indians are neither savage nor particularly noble. His characters still find themselves caught in dioramas. Sometimes they even long for the certainty, authenticity, and realness the poses of the diorama seem to offer. Low Man Smith, for example, a mid-list writer of murder mysteries of who grew up with his white mother in Seattle after his Indian father died, laments that repetitive stress injuries from typing are as close as he gets to war wounds. But Low Man is also the character who observes, above, that tourists mistake the traumatic monotony of reservation as spirituality, and who provided me with the epigraph for this section: "*You think everything is funny."Low knew for a fact that everything was funny. Homophobia? Funny! Genocide? Hilarious! Political assassination? Side-splitting! Love? Ha, Ha, Ha!*

What does this outrageousness mean? Is Low Man serious? (He is, after all, a man who makes a living writing funny books about murder.) Even in the context of the story, filled with its own collection of outrageously crisscrossed narrative lines, it's difficult to read the tone. "Indian Country" tells the story of Low Man's adventures in Missoula, Montana, where he has flown to ask Carlotta, a Flathead Indian woman he met at a Native American Children of Alcoholics convention, to marry him. He arrives to find she's eloped with someone named Chuck three days before, and is eventually thrown

out of the airport for being unable to stop laughing. Other adventures lead him to spend the night in jail, where he is kept "under observation" until he is rescued by the great unrequited love of his life, Tracy, a white lesbian, who happens to be living in town. She's on her way to have dinner with Sara, her Spokane Indian lover ("from the rez. Not like your lame urban ass," she tells Low) and her lover's Mormon parents, to whom they have just announced they are getting married. Tracy is Sara's first lover. Low Man comes along to dinner, a raucous fifth wheel. His interlocutor is Sara's father, Sid Polatkin, who has been trying to engage him in a man-to-man talk about Jesus and the abomination of lesbian marriages.

It's not completely clear whether Low just thinks his answer to Sid's accusation, or actually says it aloud, but Tracy does ask him to leave the room immediately after the (non)exchange. Certainly, Low has set out to annoy Sid and has succeeded brilliantly, as he does throughout the story. Chased from place to place, broken-hearted and obnoxious, tagged with a name that already makes him into a joke (or several jokes: "low man on the totem pole," a joke about the anonymity of the white name "smith," the absolute anonymity that the two of these suggest, the way that those who know him well simply call him "Low," no way to talk to him or about him without re-affirming his (lowly) status) Low is both Alexie's alter-ego, a spokesman, and a way to poke fun at himself and his own prejudices. In light of this, one way to read Low's audacious laughter is as the sign of a minority opinion within a minority. In the tradition of the archetypal trickster, Low is always on the outside of, or in between, something or someone or another — the reservation, white culture, masculinity, the various pairings of lovers,

husbands and wives.[47] He's there to shake up any solemn, static symmetries, even when this means derailing himself, and to laugh at love and trauma is pure heresy, even when it's ironic laughter, as it is here.

But there's something else in Low's statement, too. A reaching out and lining up that is both the source of the statement's outrageousness and the scent of its possibility. It has something to do with the outrageousness of Alexie's determination to place the Indian at the center of things: rock and roll, the blues, America itself. And it has something to do with the "Indian education" that Father Arnold, the young Catholic priest, receives when he arrives at Wellpinit reservation in *Reservation Blues*:

> Father Arnold's Indian education was quick and brutal. He heard much laughter. 'Father Arnold, we're not laughing with you, we're laughing at you." He was impressed by the Spokanes' ability to laugh. He'd never thought of Indians as being funny. What did they have to laugh about? Poverty, suicide, alcoholism? Father Arnold learned to laugh at most everything, which strangely made him feel closer to God. (*Reservation*, 36-7)

Low's laughter, Alexie's jokes, Father Arnold's education, all of this laughter disturbs one of the most solemn poses of the business of trauma, testimony, and witness itself: the isolated survivor held captive by his or her unique, unspeakable story. This isolation, which, like the pose of the tragic Indian, is very real, is exacerbated politically and psychically by the competitive hierarchies of pain that coalesce around any struggle to make the unique story of any one person or group heard in the thick of so many terrible stories. It is a political struggle, one that often happens at the level of national discourse, but it is also a narrative struggle against the obliterating pieties of universalism: 'We all suffer, we all feel pain, we are all the same underneath.'

When Alexie makes his claims for the reservation's centrality, he argues for the

possibility and the value of bearing witness to the rest of the world through the destabilizing comic perspective of his own traumatic testimony, where analogies and connections are made not through heavy-handed claims to superior, saintly and universal wisdom acquired through suffering, but through jokes, which claim only *that the connection is possible*, even if it is highly unstable, or the joke just doesn't work the way it was intended.[48] In Alexie's work, the ability to make a joke about something simultaneously signals that thing's accessibility — a person, a story, an experience, or history itself — and its impermeability. It both declares the possibility of speaking, and depends on a certain amount of silence. We laugh at the joke because we recognize its successful comparison or comment, but when we try to parse this success we kill the joke.

As a way of passing on a haunting, a strategy for inviting the reader to take up the burden of witness, the joke would seem to be especially risky, signifying, as it does, play, a lack of seriousness, improvisation, evanescence. The concern that joking will be permission to trivialize and forget will always be a valid one. But in Alexie's particular case, where the mode of disappearance and forgetting is insistently keyed to tragedy, the risk of comedy is well worth taking. Learning to read the seriousness of Alexie's jokes is, like all acts of witness, ultimately up to the reader. But Alexie seduces us with multiple stories of those who, like the anthropologist in "Dear John Wayne," miss the point when they miss the joke. He reminds us explicitly, as in the case of Father Arnold, that the jokes may be on us, whether or not we get them. And he holds out the divine possibility that we might be able to bear witness to one another not because we are really

all the same, but because we are all funny.

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[1]Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (Atlantic Monthly Press, New York: 1995), 239. All future references cited in the text, from this edition .

[2]See Phillip J. Deloria's *Playing Indian* (Yale University Press, New Haven: 1998), 142 and n. 33.

[3]Of course, in NYC they are already on an island, one whose origin myth is the story of swindling the Indians — all of Manhattan for few strings of beads.

[4]One of the most famous examples of this kind of turning away/blindness is Freud's denial of the sexual abuse testimony he had gathered in his study of hysterical women (a denial that led to the invention of the unconscious).

[5]I do not mean to damn all priests, government workers and anthropologists, many of whom had quite complex relationships with the Indian community, but to identify a rhetoric that enabled a general banal evil.

[6]John Purdy, "Crossroads: A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," SAIL 9.4 Winter 1997. (Special issue on Alexie)

[7]Other examples of the fluid movement between "the unspeakable event" and the predicament of the survivor include the work of Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth. Caruth, particularly emphasizes that trauma that has to do as much with the *loss* and inaccessability of the traumatic event, as with the event itself, and with the predicament of continuing to live.

[8]Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (BasicBooks, New York: 1992).

[9]Curiously, more than one reviewer seems to assume that Wellpinit and its surrounding lakes and mountains are purely fictional, one more measure of its marginality.

[10]Another example of people who respond to Alexie's reservation landscape are the Navajos, whose geography, daily weather, and history differ radically from the Spokanes, but who, nonetheless, as a Navajo panel at the 2000 meeting of the Multi-ethnic Literatures of the U.S. society (MELUS) reported, placed Alexie's work on their required high school curriculum.

[11]Allison: "I'd call home, talk to my mama, talk to my sisters, and feel, thank you, thank

you, Jesus, for letting me get here. And then the wave comes in of 'I should be dead.'" (Laura Miller, "Dorothy Allison," interview, *Salon,* March 31) See also, "River of Names" and "Deciding to Live" in *Trash* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Firebrand Books, c1988) and "Survival is the Least of My Desires" in *Skin* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1994). In interviews, Alexie recounts the dozens of car accidents he was in, and his bouts with alcoholism, his goal of writing ten books before he is 35 (over one a year) and making a feature motion picture before he is 40 (a goal he achieved). "At 28, Sherman Alexie, the Spokane/Coeur d'Alene virtuoso of vocabulary, is in a race against the clock. 'I know I have so much left to say and I don't know how much time I have left to say it all,' says Alexie, whose six books--five of them published in a mere 19 months--have earned nationwide critical acclaim. 'The average life expectancy of Indian men is like 49, so I'm already middle-aged,' Alexie says. 'How much time do I have left?' in Wishelle Banks, "Alexie finds inspiration in his home, humor in his family and their life," The Native Voice, 1995, cached on Alexie's official website, www.fallsapart.com, accessed March 24, 2003.

[12]Kathleen Stewart, *A Space By the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other America"* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1996), 41.

[13]Stewart, 42.

[14]Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fight in Heaven* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993), 192.

[15]Victor dreams of the priests who cut his hair, one particular father who sexually molested him, and his own failures. Checkers dreams of priests, too, in a more complicated sexual attraction that has something to do with faith, and something to do with her father's alcoholism. Junior carries the secret of a white girlfriend who aborted their child and went back to her white, middle class world. Thomas mourns the living death of his own alcoholic father.

[16]In *Reservation Blues*, as the title suggests, the connection between Indian and African American communities is explicit. Alexie's characters are launched into the battle to maintain their identities as they follow the lead of blues legend Robert Johnson's devil-infested guitar toward the white audience whose money supports Calvary Records. Women, of course, are another group who have been marked as simultaneously more spiritual and sexual. Perhaps the most obvious confluence of capitalism and the search for spirit is the New Age market, where tangible objects of "other" cultures accompanied by stories that assure the buyer of their spiritual significance are mass marketed to U.S., middle class consumers. That many of these consumers are women, or identified with marginalized groups with radical left politics, or are women who use such objects to identify themselves as sympathetic to oppressed peoples bears further inquiry. The

commodity as fetish, as explored initially by Marx, and then later by anthropologists such as James Clifford (*Predicaments of Culture*) and Michael Taussig (*Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man* and others) is its own field of study, one whose ties to trauma are rich and complex.

[17]Sherman Alexie, *The Toughest Indian in the World* (Atlantic Monthly Press, New York: 2000). All future references in text from this edition.

[18]Stewart, 42

[19]Deloria, 155.

[20]Stewart, 42.

[21]See *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Especially pages 4-5.

[22]Deloria reports the members of the society wrote little but letters to one another. See all of Chapter 3, but especially 74-80 in *Playing Indian*.

[23]Deloria, 90.

[24]For an extended meditation and report on the legal ramifications of the notion of American Indian authenticity see James Clifford's essay on the Mashpee Indians in *The Predicament of Culture* (see note 26 below). The notion of living up to an impossible authenticity, so familiar to Native Americans, has more recently been seen as an innovation in postmodern thought, for example, Judith Butler's writing on the impossibility of gender.

[25]For my discussion of museums, citizenship and the diorama I have drawn from Donna Haraway's *Primate Visions* (New York: Routledge, 1989), particularly 26-58. For comments on immigration and museum display see 42-46.

[26]James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); 215-248. See particularly 224.

[27]For example, the strange tale of *The Education of Little Tree* (New York: Delacorte Press/E. Friede, 1976), a "memoir" of a Cherokee childhood by Asa "Forrest" Carter, a former member of the Ku Klux Klan and speechwriter for George Wallace. Marketed as an autobiography, *Little Tree* was adopted as a paragon of New Age wisdom, and found its way onto many a "multicultural" primary school syllabus, where it has remained, in

some cases, even after Carter's debunking. For a good accounting of the tale in all its glorious weirdness see Allen Barrag, "The Education of Little Fraud," *Salon.com*, Dec. 20, 2001. See also Kali Tal's discussion of genre and the use of the Holocaust as metonym in *Worlds of Hurt* (Cambridge (England); New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6-7.

[28]Leslie Marmon Silko, for example, who in *Ceremony* (New York : Viking Press, 1977) turned to literature as a means of re-invigorating traditional ceremonies in a forum (contemporary American literature) tacitly marked as middle class risked — and was criticized for — a literally blasphemous undertaking, exposing sacred ceremonies and stories without context to those outside the tribe.

[29]Gerald Vizenor ed., *Narrative Chance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

[30]Haraway, *Primate Visions* (see note above), particularly 35-42.

[31]An earlier draft of this chapter included a long section (what I came to see as a digression) on one of the most striking examples of the power of the diorama on the living bodies of Indians and their relationships to whites in general and anthropologists in particular: the story of "Ishi the Last Yahi." An unnamed member of the Yahi tribe, "Ishi," (the word for "man" in the Yahi language) spent the last four years of his life as a living exhibit, janitor, and anthropological specimen at the UC Berkeley Museum of Natural History. The museum, donated by heiress Phoebe Apperson Hearst and filled with her own collection of primitive artifacts, came with a requirement that the janitor live in the museum — thus Ishi's employment. In particular, I was interested in the moment of Ishi's death, when Kroeber displayed, for the first time, an acute sense of conflict between Ishi as person and friend, and Ishi as object of science. Kroeber sent a telegram forbidding the university to perform an autopsy. His dictate arrived too late, or was ignored. When Ishi was buried his brain was preserved. In order to step outside the diorama he found himself frozen in, Kroeber had to resign his post and retreat into psychoanalysis for two years following Ishi's death. His success in abandoning the diorama is much debated. He returned to the top of his field and donated Ishi's brain to the Smithsonian. In the epilogue to this story, the California Indians lobbied successfully under the repatriation act to get Ishi's brain back.

The story of Ishi became a very important one for native authors, particularly for Vizenor, who taught at Berkeley before leaving in protest, partly over the university's refusal to rename Kroeber Hall, "Ishi Hall." The Ishi story was later made into the Emmy-award winning HBO movie *The Last of His Tribe*, starring Graham Greene. I am currently developing this section into a separate article.

[32]Sherman Alexie, *The Summer of Black Widows*. Brooklyn, N.Y. : Hanging Loose Press, 1996.

[33]In particular he records the career of Arthur C. Parker, the grandson of Lewis Henry Morgan's primary native informant, who by 1915, was an anthropologist firmly ensconced in a career that would eventually lead him to help found an Indian Camp for white children whose best selling point was that it hired genuine Indians as its camp counselors.

[34]See the government website on NAGPRA for a full history, (http://www.usbr.gov/nagpra/). More recently, Indians have collaborated on public presentations and memorializations of their history. The University of Arizona in Tucson, for example, has collaborated with local tribes to create diormas of contemporary everyday life whose figures are modeled on, and named after the people who helped to create them.

[35]In Calvin Martin ed., *The American Indian and the Problem of History* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1987), 98.

[36]ibid. 98

[37]ibid. 98-9

[38]Bruce Barcott, "This is What It Means to be Sherman Alexie," *Men's Journal*, Feb. 1998.

[39]*Smoke Signals*, directed by Chris Eyre, was released June 26, 1999 by Miramax to critical and popular acclaim. It featured an "all-Indian" cast and crew — a first. Alexie's most recent film, *The Business of Fancydancing*, directed by Alexie, was released this year and features a gay Indian protagonist. It has been making the rounds of independent and gay film festivals to mixed reviews.

[40]*The News Hour with Jim Lehrer***,** July 9, 1998. *60 Minutes*, "Spotlight on Indian Writers," March 21, 2001 and "The Toughest Indian in the World," July 17, 2001. *Oprah*, special on the "Museum of Tolerance" opening in Los Angeles, CA. January 30, 2003. Oprah surprised Alexie with medals his grandfather had (unbeknownst to Alexie) won while fighting and dying on Okinawa during World War II.

[41]One such joke was a variation on the following, from the SAIL interview (see above): "I tell people, that Indians . . . that whites beat Indians in wars was not because they were tougher; I mean, we'd beat them, on any one given day. But then the whites would want to fight the next day again, and we just didn't want to do that. We'd want to go talk about

it. You can hear the stories, the next day the warriors going "Man, remember when you dodged that bullet?" and the day after that it was "Hey, remember when that guy shot you nine times and you survived?" Alexie's career has grown at a phenomenal rate. In 1999, when I began this project, Alexie was considered almost too new and unknown a writer to include in a dissertation. Four years later, at a recent job interview, my interlocutor suggested my choice of Alexie was suspect because of his "overexposure."

[42]Even *Reservation Blues,* what seems to me a basically comic novel, was castigated for its "darkness." See especially, Native American critic Gloria Bird's "The Exaggeration of Despair in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* " (Wicazo SA Review. 11(2):47-52. 1995 Fall). Alexie was particularly bothered by this review and wrote a poem, "The Exaggeration of Despair" in response to it. In interviews, Alexie cites reviews like Bird's as one of the catalysts for his serial killer mystery about racial tensions in Seattle, *Indian Killer*. "I wrote this [*Indian Killer*] first and foremost because people — critics and audiences — kept talking about *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Reservation Blues* as if they were dark, depressing, Kafka-ish, cockroach-nightmare-crawling- across-the-floor kind of books. Actually they're very funny. I think they have happy endings. I thought, 'Okay, you want dark and depressing? Here you go. Here's *Indian Killer*. You're going to look back with fondness at the whimsical *Reservation Blues*, the lighthearted *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*.'" Tomson Highway, "Spokane Words: Tomson Highway raps with Sherman Alexie," *Aboriginal Voices,* January-March 1997.

[43]Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1992), 167-168.

[44]Kateri Tekawitha (or Tekawita, or Tekakwitha, or Tekagawitha), or the "Lily of the Mohawks," was an indigenous Christian martyr of New France, 1656-1680. She was beatified by Pope John Paul II on 22 June 1980, and was one of the first indigenous saints of the New World. Her feast day is celebrated on 14 July. The "Owens" of the "Owens Lectureship" is almost undoubtedly the late Louis Owens, novelist, critic and scholar, with whom Alexie had a somewhat fractious relationship.

[45]This is a standard comment that Alexie has made in many interviews. For his comment on *The Searchers* and a series of other pro- and anti-Indian movies including *Dances With Wolves* see Hillel Italie, "The Many Lives of Sherman Alexie," AP, in *Navajo Times,* online edition, http://www.thenavajotimes.com/Sunny/Sherman_Alexie/sherman_alexie.html. Accessed March 23, 2003.

[46]Marion Morrison really is John Wayne's real name. Legend has it he took to the nickname "Duke" because it was "better than that girl's name" his parents had saddled

him with. See, among many elaborate fan sites, http://www.jwplace.com/.

[47]For a full — if somewhat dated — discussion of the trickster in Native American mythology see Paul Radin's *The trickster; a study in American Indian mythology* (with commentaries by Karl Kerenyi and C. G. Jung. London, Routledge and Paul: 1955). For a more contemporary, indigenous perspective, see Kenneth Lincoln's, *Ind'in Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1993).

[48]In a recent column for Seattle's alternative weekly newspaper, Alexie both called for the United States' foreign policy decisions about Iraq's broken promises to be judged in light of the U.S. government's history of broken treaties, and explained why his attempts to make a series of jokes on this topic at a recent anti-war rally had failed. See "Relevant Contradictions," *The Stranger*, Vol. 12, No. 24, Feb. 27-Mar.5, 2003. My thanks to Mia Carter for bringing this column to my attention.

Chapter Three

Law, Literature and the Traumatic Contract

Trauma as usual: silencing contracts and persistent ghosts

Judith Herman opens her landmark study of trauma, *Trauma and Recovery*, by discussing what she later calls "the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy" that compel and repress testimony about trauma:

> The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable.*
>
> Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told. Murder will out. Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims.[1]

Though I clearly agree with Herman about the power of testimony, for the purposes of this chapter, I am most interested in the categories embedded in Herman's language, and how they might propel the difficulty of telling and hearing (or writing and reading) testimony. The two metaphors driving Herman's description are the violated compact and the persistent haunting of ghosts. The social compact is a naturalized stand-in — so naturalized that Herman might not have specified it as such herself — for that product of eighteenth-century political philosophy, the social contract. In Herman's formulation, the contract/compact is transformed into a simple description of the human condition, the act of banishing atrocities simply the human thing to do. By naturalizing the contract, she

effaces the power struggles inherent in its enforcement even as she aligns it with the (self?)enforced silence of the *unspeakable*.

But remembering the compact's Enlightenment roots makes the appearance of the ghosts in Herman's next paragraph far less surprising. A traumatic event that violates the pragmatic, enlightened, social norm is "unspeakable" — except, that is, in the language of that "folk wisdom" whose superstitious ways the Enlightenment's dreams of pure reason and free will have successfully banished to the unofficial, the underground. In Herman's introduction, even the *story* of such traumatic events, their testimony, is banished to the strange underworld that she gestures to so briefly, a world "filled with ghosts" who demand to be heard.

It may seem as though I am overreading — as though the presence of the social contract in Herman's introduction is itself so ghostly that to raise the specter of the Enlightenment is merely to change the subject. But in its very offhandedness, Herman's reliance on the idea of a social compact reveals the degree to which the idea of something like the social contract, some kind of precondition of natural, if relative, stability called a "world view," or "the psyche," or, in the case of historical trauma, "nation," "society," or "culture," is a necessary precondition for figuring trauma as a violation, or more commonly (drawing on its Greek etymology) as a *wound*. In Herman's introduction, for psychotherapy as a discipline (if not for individual cases) this is a wound that can be, calls out to be healed — both individually and socially, through the restoration of that order. Under this rubric, trauma must be paired with recovery, just as the unspeakable is always paired with its insistently noisy ghosts, and the victim with an identifiable

perpetrator.

Herman is intimately acquainted with both official social resistance to trauma and trauma's teeming underground life. Her work was instrumental in redefining trauma as "not outside the range"[2] of "normal" human experience, a counter-definition based on her decades of work as a feminist clinician. Herman is firmly on the side of testimony's persistent ghosts. It is even more striking then that the implicit definition of the social compact with which she opens *Trauma and Recovery* re-inscribes trauma as a fundamental exception.

In the preceding two chapters I have, like Herman, been on the side of persistent ghosts. But unlike her, I have moved away from a necessary pairing of individual healing and social order, tracking instead the ways in which *healing* too often comes to mean *closure* in the public discourse of those who insist that trauma is either a current national emergency (as in the case of sexual abuse) or a tragic event of the nation's past (as in the case of Native American genocide). I have shown how both Dorothy Allison and Sherman Alexie testify to the long-term effects of traumas that refuse the distinction between national and individual histories, and can only temporarily be allocated to a single event. The picture of trauma that emerges from their literary testimony moves us away from an understanding of trauma that can be captured by the metaphor of a single wound or shock or even scar — whether a rupture in the psyche, or, as in the case of national and historical traumas, a rupture in the nation's official story about itself, often twinned with geographical rupture (the partitioning of India, for example, or the Mason-Dixon line). It's not that shocks and wounds don't figure in the trauma stories of Allison

and Alexie — they do. But instead of a single forceful blow they are part of a recurring series. They feel less like something new and unexpected and more like the return of something very old and dreaded; something for which it is nonetheless impossible to prepare. Thus, as the powerful figure of the wound recedes, the figure of haunting comes to the fore.

I have suggested that literary testimony hopes *to pass on a haunting* and that insofar as the texts I have read extend an invitation to their readers to share the burden of bearing witness, they do so through this delicate mechanism. But the haunting that Allison and Alexie describe is not, or is not only, the return of the repressed, the unspeakable finally spoken. For, as I have argued, these writers also introduce us to the ways in which trauma can permeate the everyday. Speaking from within what Walter Benjamin called "the tradition of the oppressed," they teach us about trauma, as Benjamin tried to teach us about history, that atrocity, and trauma itself, is not exceptional: "The 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."[3] When, as bystanders, we continue to think of atrocity as exceptional, we leave the survivor mired in the isolation of that exception and remove ourselves from the possibilities of witnessing. On the one hand, we are continually surprised, even hysterical, when horror re-emerges. Each event is a fresh, individual crisis that fully absorbs our attention — whether we're rushing to help or merely rubbernecking — and distracts us from what has come before, that is, from history. "The current amazement," Benjamin wrote on the eve of World War II, "that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the

beginning of knowledge — unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable." Our amazed non-knowledge, Michael Taussig reminds us in "Terror as Usual: Walter Benjamin's Theory of History as a State of Siege," lulls us "toward numbing and apparent acceptance" as we — and here the "we" is the first-world, middle class, mostly American we of Taussig's audience — casually classify much of the world, much of the time, as an exception:

> Of course that's elsewhere, always elsewhere, you'll want to say, not the rule but the exception, existing in An-Other Place like Northern Ireland, Beirut, Ethiopia, Kingston, Port Au Prince, Peru, Mozambique, Afghanistan, Santiago, the Bronx, the West Bank, South Africa, San Salvador, Colombia, to name but some of the more publicized from the staggering number of spots troubling the course of the world's order.

"But perhaps such an elsewhere should make us suspicious," Taussig continues, "about the deeply rooted sense of order here, as if their dark wildness exists so as to silhouette our light, the bottom line being, of course, the tight and necessary fit between order, law, justice, sense, economy, and history..." [4]

In *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, Patricia Williams, an African American law professor specializing in commercial contract law, testifies, not without difficulty, to the everyday presence of trauma precisely in and from that *tight and necessary fit between order, law, justice, sense, economy, and history*, restoring, through the literary, the connections that law and traditional legal scholarship efface.[5] In this chapter I turn to her work as an example of testimony that takes seriously the notion that trauma is fundamental to the social contract. Reading Williams' legal critique as literary testimony, I show how Williams' style performs, and teaches her readers, the double vision necessary for bearing witness to the way the world of the social contract as expressed

through commercial contract law, and the folk world of ghost stories to which the unspeakable is banished, are deeply connected. In the context of this project as a whole, *Alchemy* stands as both another example of the power of the literary to capture certain aspects of trauma, and as an example of what can happen to our understanding of trauma when literature speaks to social sciences — in this case law — that have traditionally held sway over trauma's domain.

I begin by tracking the eruption of the literary in *Alchemy*, particularly stories of hauntings and madness that announce trauma's presence. The law's normative exclusion of these stories is based on a willful forgetting that I call a *traumatic contract*, a forgetting for which the bill of sale for Williams' great-great-grandmother to her great-great-grandfather stands as a primary example. Though it may try to forget, the law remains beholden to the example, literary evidence that continually threatens the hoped-for perfection of its pure domain of theoretical absolutes. I examine both the law's attempts to control the literary potential of the example and the nature of Williams' challenge to this attempt.

Finally, I argue that Williams' challenge to law's exclusionary practices is fundamentally pedagogical. Her testimony teaches through example in two ways: First, Williams' primary methodology — invention through necessity — is to teach us to see trauma's pervasive presence through the sheer heterogeneity of, and primary allegiance to, her examples. In their proliferation they ask: See this? And that? And how they are connected? Important and silly, personal and national, direct and implicit, Williams' choice of examples embraces their inherent tendency to mean more than their author

intends. Second, by narrating in the first person, she offers herself as an example of a witness who is both subject to and a perpetrator of the traumatic forces she tracks. Her struggles serve as both evidence and possible model.

The experience Williams offers up is sometimes as frightening as it is inspiring; her methodology seems born out of desperate necessity as much as imagination and invention. Running through *Alchemy*'s pedagogical testimony on connections is a counter-lesson on our intense desire to deny those connections, and what is at stake in that desire. More than 60 years after Benjamin's warning, our twenty-first century amazement at what is still happening is only increased by our surprise at the pure difficulty of keeping current with what is by now old news. Benjamin's lesson in remembering is a difficult, perhaps impossible, lesson to learn, especially for those who, like Williams, make witnessing their profession. Williams' work testifies eloquently to the paralyzing exhaustion produced by that remembering, but it also, in the two scenes I read in my conclusion, glimpses the redemptive possibilities of the kind of radical connections its testimony reveals.

The law and its ghosts: the question of genre

What does it mean to understand trauma as fundamental to the social contract? How does one bear witness to the presence of such trauma? These are the questions I want to foreground as I turn now to *The Alchemy of Race and Rights.* To do so, however, I have to take a detour, one that is actually a shortcut to the heart of the matter, through the question of genre. To put it plainly, what is a law professor doing in a project that

professes its allegiance to the literary?[6] Why this turn from novels, short stories, memoirs and poetry, to a collection of critical legal essays? In what sense is *Alchemy* testimony, *literary* testimony, about trauma?

It is not difficult to see that the subject matter of *Alchemy* is bound up with trauma. There is the traumatic content of the highly publicized legal cases Williams investigates, stories we know as a tangle of unsatisfactory narratives, or iconically, metonymically, through proper nouns — *Tawana Brawley*, *Eleanor Bumpurs*, *Howard Beach*. And *Alchemy* is, as a whole, deeply informed by the history of slavery, a great national trauma that is comprised of many, many private traumas. But what caught my attention about *Alchemy* was not its subject matter *per se* but the way Williams' treatment of these subjects seethes with the hauntings that are the markers of trauma's weird affect. Visions and familiars, spirits and souls, ghosts and phantoms, shamans and word-sorcerers, madwomen and hallucinatory polar bears all make regular appearances in *Alchemy*, bespeaking trauma's irreparable tear in the fabric of what we like to think is daily reality. Again and again, Williams has recourse to the rhetoric of the uncanny and the irrational, of madness and of split consciousness. Ostensibly, a series of linked essays on such critical legal studies topics as race, contract law and privatization, *Alchemy's* subtitle, *Diary of a Law Professor*, announces both its intimate first person narrative, and its allegiance to daily detail as well as legal theory. Reading not only the letter and the spirit of the law, but its ghosts, too, she shows us the way these specters crowd the margins of — and are produced by — the bright lines and strict rhetorical categories of law, and of contracts bolstered by an Enlightenment dream of private citizens and free

will.

Like Allison, Williams locates the catalyst for her project in a story that haunts her: the discovery of what appears to be the bill of sale — the commercial contract — that ensured the purchase and subsequent rape of her 11-year-old African maternal great-great-grandmother, Sophie, by 35-year-old Austin Miller, the white Southern lawyer who was Williams' great-great-grandfather. Sophie's violent transformation from girl to breeding chattel is a traumatic event that, like that of Allison's girl narrator, is neither an exceptional crisis, nor easily locatable in a single event. It is an individual trauma that expresses a national trauma, a sexual trauma that is also a racial trauma, an event that is both catastrophic and perfectly routine. It is also perfectly legal — the result of a contract based, as all contracts ultimately are, on the social contract.

Williams frames *Alchemy* as part of a long-term project — what seems to me must be a life-long project — of:

> …tracking Austin Miller's words through his letters and opinions — and those of his sons who were also lawyers and judges, of finding *the shape described by [Sophie's] absence…in the vast networking of our society, and in the evils and oversights that plague our lives and laws*… The control he had over her body. *The force he was in her life, in the shape of my life today.* The power he exercised in the choice to breed her or not. The choice to breed slaves in his image, to choose her mate and be that mate. In his attempt to own what no man can own, the habit of his power and the absence of her choice.
>
> I look for her shape and his hand. (19, emphasis mine)

Explicitly tying together absence, society, and law, with the seemingly more intimate story of Austin and Sophie, and bringing together as well the traumatic encounter of the past with its continued force in her everyday life, this passage outlines the project of the book, forecasting its fascination with the line between objects and bodies, past and

present, private and public.

As sociologist Avery Gordon notes, in her own book on ghostly matters, this is " a massive project, very treacherous, very fragile…a project in which haunting and phantoms play a central part."[7] The haunting to which Williams bears witness is a deeply structural one — not simply the reverberations of a traumatic event, even a so-called "event" as massively complex as slavery in America and the invention of race — but a series of traumatic contracts, of which the bill of sale assuring the violent stabilization of Sophie as Austin Miller's property is emblematic. Far from indicating, as we usually understand trauma to do, a rupture in the social contract, traumatic contracts work to guard, or often simply *are* the social contract. They are the Faustian bargains we make, the willful forgetting in which we engage to produce such effects as universal truth, individual autonomy, and the value and ownership of property (like Sophie), and the distinction between objects and beings. As such they form the texture of no less than our daily lives.

Both invisible and hypervisible, traumatic contracts and their effects manifest in the quick slip and flash of the quotidian — the evidence of their presence is here, here, here and — quick! over there! We can't get away from them, so they're hard to see. They're in the background noise of the TV on in the next room, the one that Williams, who has made it her profession, as well as her life's work, to bear witness to this noise, is watching, tuned into the media stream of catastrophe on the all-news network on one of her bad days home from school.[8] She's looking for the perfect news item, the perfectly modular example, to jumpstart, she tells us, what eventually becomes *The Alchemy of*

Race and Rights. She finds one, but it's only the first one, and we're off and running "down the rabbit hole," as Williams puts it, of the through-the-mirror land of her project, where one story leads to three or four others.

Like *Bastard Out of Carolina*'s narrative attempts to capture trauma's quotidian aspect, *Alchemy* works through a process of accretion and accumulation, refusing background and foreground for a shifting series of linked plots.[9] But because *Alchemy* is not a novel, nor even a memoir, employing these strategies signifies a willingness to risk performing, rather than simply declaiming, its argument, to write, as Williams puts it in her introduction, "in a way that bridges the traditional gap between theory and praxis," that doesn't seek "merely to simplify" but to produce "a text that is multi-layered, that encompasses the straightforwardness of life *and* reveals its complexity" by shifting its allegiance from beautiful theories and strategic political plans to the messiness of lived experience (6).

The endless search for the perfect example, that is, the perfect *story* from which all other stories may be extrapolated, that produces this accumulation, is the clearest marker of Williams' efforts to witness the all-pervasive trauma of an American social contract founded on the transformation of human beings into objects of property. It is also one of the strongest reasons to read *Alchemy* as literary testimony, and to include it as a primary text in this project, which tracks the way the literary leads us toward an understanding of trauma's quotidian aspect. For it is Williams' attempt to move back and forth between the all-too-present hand of Austin Miller as found in the land's laws, and the shape of Sophie's absence as traced by the land's lives, that leads her to move back

and forth between something that looks like legal scholarship and a wildly heterogenous, genre-bending mix of literary strategies that include memoir, elegy, allegory, and parody.[10] Looking for her evidence, and finding it everywhere at once, Williams can't quantify or classify, she can only tell and connect, in ways that literature works toward, and traditional legal scholarship works against. In Williams' work, the law's ghosts include not only those, like Sophie, whose stories it radically conscribes, but literature itself.

Thus, in *Alchemy* the eruption of the literary into the legal isn't merely a matter of style (as if that weren't enough). It is an argument: part of Williams' analysis of the law itself. When readers ignore this, treating the literary as decorative style, the law as meaty content, they not only miss Williams' point, they often fail to see that she has one at all. Williams is acutely aware of this possibility. Throughout *Alchemy* she invites her readers to recognize how her testimony works by drawing attention to the ways in which others fail to do so, telling stories of journalists who misquote her, colleagues who dismiss her as too emotional, histrionic or just plain crazy, students who go over her head to complain to the dean that she is not teaching them "real law," and law reviews who reject her work, suggesting she might want to try writing short stories instead. [11]

As Barbara Johnson argues in "The Alchemy of Style and Law," Williams' style is intimately connected to race and the fact of Williams' blackness. The rejection and misreading of Williams' style (in Johnson's essay, by the Harvard Law Review) is often predicated on the maintaining power through erasure of difference.[12] In general, Johnson points out, law reviews privilege a style that creates the illusion of neutrality,

accessibility, and transparency, and that "proves" its arguments with myriad footnotes pointing to scholarly precedents. This particular ideology of style, Johnson argues, powerfully reinforces already established hierarchies of power. *Alchemy*, on the other hand, both documents the disassociative thinking required to produce the illusion of neutrality and confronts that domain with the stories and connections it has effaced. Johnson writes:

> If academic writing or legal codes are defined through their exclusions and disconnections, then what Patricia Williams does is to find, explore, elaborate, and restore the connections among the bills of sale for her great-great-grandmother, the lawyer and great-great-grandfather who bought and impregnated the young slave, the contemporary homeless man on the street, the advertising industry, the academic conference circuit, a basketball camp in Hanover, New Hampshire, Christmas shopping, the Critical Legal Studies movement, and the United States Constitution. The madness of juxtaposition mimes the structure of the social text.[13]

These connections and juxtapositions and elaborations are literary evidence produced *about and from within the reach of the law.* By staking literature's claim from within the law, Williams not only bears witness to the complexities of life that the law's sense-making grid excludes (the way the short stories the law review recommends would) she also restores primacy, agency, and interiority to the law's objects: the people, things, relationships, transactions, and narratives it seeks to define and control. By recognizing her work as literary testimony, we not only recognize the law itself as just one story among many, but the importance of looking for literary evidence where it has already begun to do its transformative work.

The ideology of the example

Williams' turn towards literature is a triumph of the example, a form of implicit storytelling through which the law's objects have always exerted their force on its abstractions. For though the law may dream of the universal application that would arise from perfect abstraction, this dream runs directly counter to the way those abstractions are created — through the storytelling of case law — and the way that they are applied — through the detective story of policing and the courtroom. The example and that which it illustrates are forever in tension within the law.

For Henry Louis Gates, *Alchemy* is "first and foremost a meditation on example. For a good reason: Case law is all about example. It's founded on the doctrine of *stare decisis* ("Let the decision stand"), of respecting precedent, of leaving well enough alone."[14] The precedential example works through the literary logic of simile and metaphor, of comparing two things to create an idea of understanding that surpasses both: That case may stand for this one because they are alike in these ways; following the contours of this example we learn the following things about this situation in general. The excess of this kind of literary signification leaves room for argument and change: What does the case really mean? How can it be interpreted? *Stare decisis*, however, pushes the once-living example toward the status of dead metaphor, something whose meaning has been agreed upon so long we've long since ceased to see the leap of logic it took to produce this meaning. Thus does the story of a long-dead British nobleman trespassing on another nobleman's land during a fox hunt come to stand as the basis for decisions about contemporary property rights. Williams reanimates the dead metaphors

of precedent, rewriting the story, in this case, from the point of view of the fox, or, in the case of slaves and women, the point of view of the property itself.[15]

As Williams' project implies, the legal example was never quite stable to begin with, the metaphors never completely dead. The pressure to create new precedents is historical, and Gates situates *Alchemy* in the context of a kind of crisis of example in case law: the increasing feeling, in the first two decades of the 20th century, that there were so many examples of such great variety that the law itself was in danger of being lost. Although some legal scholars argued, as Gates writes, that "judges pretty much made things up as they went along anyway, being constrained by a sense of justice rather than those precedential strictures to which they paid obeisance," the American Law Institute was formed in 1923. The American Law Institute saw itself as responding to "the two chief defects in American law, its uncertainty and its complexity," defects which had produced "a general dissatisfaction with the administration of justice."[16]

The Institute's answer to this was to gather up all these myriad complexities and produce, through a systematic series of committees and drafts, "a restatement of basic legal subjects that would tell judges and lawyers what the law was."[17] The Institute soon produced the First Restatement of Agency, Conflict of Laws, Contracts, Judgments, etc. and later, after more examples had accumulated, a Second Restatement, and so on into the present work on a Third Restatement, all in a grand attempt to, as Gates puts it, "kill the example through codification." This project, like Williams', is massive, and massively complicated, a project for many lifetimes.

What fascinates me about the project of restatement is that "killing example

through codification" sums up precisely one of the most common methods of controlling and containing trauma stories. Here then, is the legal world's analogue for reducing individual trauma stories to a set of medical symptoms for the purpose of diagnosis. The analogue for the selection and repetition of a few narrow versions of a single trauma story for the purposes of civilizing, citizen-building entertainment. Or the reduction of national trauma to national myth — as in the reduction of the genocide of the American Indian to the myth of the Noble Savage's tragic disappearance — for the purposes of justifying federal land grabs and other policies. Sometimes this codification is useful, even necessary — one could argue, for example, that traumatic memory must undergo a certain amount of codification to become a communicable story at all. More often, however, codification robs trauma stories of their authority and their political power, their ability to upset hierarchies and undo the (traumatic) contracts that have produced, and then controlled and justified, the traumas in the first place.

The project of restatement resembles nothing so much as an affirmation of faith in fundamentalism — an attempt to live the dream of what is called "the black letter of the law," a mythical dimension of legal text that is the doorway to a level-land of clear boundaries, objectivity, and stable terms, an attempt that requires a great faith in the stability of the world and the word. The way these two things come together, the urge to control the form and number of trauma stories, and the statement of faith, is the wish to preserve one's faith, or, if it is too late for that, then, as the Law Institute has tried to do, to preserve a domain, a vantage point from which it is possible to stand, at least temporarily, high above everything that gets in the way of holding that view.

The longing for this domain is not obviously or always a longing for domination. It is also a longing to understand, to know for certain, and to act on that certainty. The blindfold Justice wears as she holds out her scales speaks to the way codification is supposed to work: as a screen that blocks out all the extraneous details that would stand in the way of a perfect impartiality. Williams, whose column for *The Nation* features an image of Justice peeking from beneath her blindfold,[18] begins by assuming such impartiality is impossible. By courting the excess meaning of her examples and refusing to order them under a single thesis, by drawing her examples from realms devalued by traditional legal scholarship, including personal history, she reveals the violence required to decide what evidence is admissible, and to mask the fact of that decision and who is doing the deciding. In fact, one way to define traumatic contracts, is precisely as the terrible bargains of willful forgetting that make the black letter of the law appear to be within reach.

Love, money and forgetting: the story of B

Ironically, my efforts to describe the effects of Williams' use of examples have led me, thus far, to speak in general, collective terms about her work. Perhaps the most important characteristic of examples is their specificity, the details that make it possible for Williams to use them as archives of exclusions. The specificity of examples means they serve as both evidence and illustration, a factor crucial for *Alchemy*'s pedagogical intentions — to both bear witness, and to teach its readers *how to see* the ghosts it follows. Working through anecdote, analogy, example, deliberately courting excesses of

signification, Williams escapes the traditional essay's demand for a single persuasive, closed argument. She gives us examples as though they were objects of meditation, objects that it is the reader's job to study. Instead, like a teacher in a classroom, Williams leads us in discussion, creates frameworks for further thought. (Though she also repeats and repeats, with a difference, those points she wishes to emphasize clearly.)

But *Alchemy* is about pedagogy in a much more explicit sense. Williams is a law professor, and she returns again and again to law school and its rituals — lectures, grading, exams, office hours — all of which reveal in fine detail the propagation of the ideology of law and its effects that is her subject of critique. Amongst the disciplining practices of law school, Williams' authority as a professor, her interest in critiquing the traditional methodology of the law, and her unavoidably embodied presence as a black woman come together with a special intensity. Standing in front of her students, lecturing on the way the intersections of race and gender undermine the boundary lines of contract law, drawing her examples from the history of African Americans and women, the boundaries between subject and teacher also blur. Twinned with the degraded forms of knowledge she brings into conversation with the law, Williams struggles to maintain the authority leant to her by the institution she represents, defending herself from students who don't always distinguish between their resistance to the ways of seeing she offers, and the woman who offers them. The permeability between her subject and her subjectivity extends to the line between world and classroom. Whether she is speaking to actual students, or simply to a stranger who doesn't understand, Williams can never stop teaching. The paths across campus, the Benetton downtown, and as we'll see below, the

quiet sanctity of the library, all become spaces of pedagogical crisis.[19]

As a law professor, Williams is compelled by the Dean, by most of her colleagues, and by her students themselves to teach the black letter of the law. At this, as she tells it, she fails. Williams' first year law students usually make their appearance *en masse* and are understood to be predominantly white and middle or upper class. A difficult audience, to say the least, they are comedic stand-in's for her most difficult, most apathetic readership. In one scene they sit in the lecture hall, listening to her lecture on and on, piling story upon story in a desperate attempt to beat the clock that bounds the lecture hour. In another, they are bored and confused by her attempts to tease out the connections between commodification, consumerism and the transformation of human beings into objects of property, and yearn to go shopping instead. Worried about passing the bar exam, they complain that what they are learning is "not real law." They feel anxious and yearn, Williams tells us, for the "crisp, refreshing, clear-headed sensation that 'thinking like a lawyer' purportedly endows" (13).

When Williams fails to teach the black letter of the law, she breaks the contract that polices the boundaries of the law classroom. The reactions of Williams' middle and upper class students might seem quite banal — nothing more than the usual student resistance to working under an unfamiliar set of expectations, or exploring an unfamiliar set of political assumptions. But it is just this kind of everyday anxiety that announces the fretful echoes of the kind of remembering that drives Williams' student, B., a middle class student who is feeling the disquieting effects of learning to see her own traumatic contracts, into an angry confrontation with her teacher beyond the confines of the

classroom. I want to turn now to an extended reading of this confrontation, a story Williams uses to reflect on the traumatic contracts of passing and assimilation her family, and she herself, has made. These are stories of love and money in a commercial world that regularly turns beings into objects, and the forgetting necessary to keep believing in safety, autonomy, and love. But they are also stories of the fragility of that forgetting, and the way the memory of those bargains, deflected, refracted, keeps flashing up into the everyday.

The story of B. begins, as is so often the case when trauma makes itself known, with an interruption. Williams writes:

> I am sitting in the library preparing a class on homelessness and the law. A student of mine, B., interrupts my writing. She is angry at me because, she says, my class is "out of control." She has been made to feel guilty, by the readings and the discussion, that her uncle is, as she describes him, "a slumlord." She says that the rich can't help who they are. I resent this interruption and snap at her: "They can help who they are as much" — and here I give B. back her own words of only a day or so before — "as poor people who are supposed to 'help' themselves out of poverty (as distinguished, of course, from helping themselves to any of the 'unearned' goodies of the wealthy)." I am very angry and it shows. I can feel how unprofessorial I must seem; looking into her eyes, I know I'll have to pay.
>
> A few days later I receive a memo from the associate dean, expressing his concern about the way in which certain inappropriate "trumping moves" are being employed to "silence the more moderate members of the student body."(21)

There is much to say here about anger and pedagogical power and the lack of power, a subject to which I'll return (in a re-reading of this passage) in the following chapter on pedagogy. Here, I want to focus on the way Williams unfolds her series of examples from this initial confrontation: the way, that is, that the classroom methodology that started the fight in the first place also leads Williams beyond the traditional role of

teacher, and back toward an examination of her own bad bargains.

One reading of this anecdote, perhaps the easiest one, is to say it is a story of B.'s arrogant refusal to own up to her connection to, and her uncle's power over, the poor. Especially (putting "slumlord" and "the homeless" side by side) the poor about whom Williams is writing. In this summary, the story is also a story about B.'s insular self-righteousness, the guilt she feels when prodded toward enlightenment by her education, and her angry refusal to learn her lesson. Williams begins with this reading, characterizing B.'s complaint as an example of the logic of wealthy self-possession: "something like: the poor are envious of the rich; the rich worked hard to get where they are or have more valuable social characteristics and therefore deserve it; they have suffered."[20] In fact, writes Williams, "B. kept saying just that: 'My family suffered for what they have'" (22). Contracts scholar Carol Pateman has described this logic, tracking the way it is inscribed in the economic assumptions that lie behind the American social contract, as the literal self-possession of the wealthy versus the empty, dispossessed poor. The former own full stock in themselves, while the latter must sell this stock to others in the form of labor.[21]

For Williams, always looking for the cost of such sales, B.'s logic reveals the cruelty and the falsehood of the system it justifies. Maybe, Williams writes, "the best way to overcome all these divisions is indeed to acknowledge the suffering of the middle and upper classes." When B. says that Williams' class is "out of control," she is responding to the ways in which Williams has challenged the willful forgetting necessary to believe in her own self-possession. Recognizing this, Williams moves from

articulating the logic that B. thinks of herself as following, to a reading of the traumatic contract fueling B.'s own loss of control:

> I think about B.'s uncle the slumlord and the tax I seem to have extorted in her life's bargain not to think about him with guilt. I wonder at the price her uncle must have charged to begin with, in the agreement not to think of him in unheroic terms. And if the consideration in such an exchange is more than just money and material gain — if the real transaction is not for "salary" but for survival itself, for love and family and connections, then this becomes a contract of primal dimensions. (23)

B. and her uncle make their contract over the erased bodies of her uncle's tenants. While we don't fully know the terms of the contract, we can speculate, along with Williams, that one way B. has contracted to continue loving her uncle is to separate the private person whom she loves, from his public persona as a slumlord. Following Williams connections, B. has been unable to maintain her division between the private and public sphere. As Williams' insistent rhetoric of economic exchange and Pateman's argument both suggest, B.'s protest shows us the ways in which privacy and intimacy are deeply connected, and the degree to which money buys both.[22] Whether or not B. is economically dependent on her uncle, her contract to love him includes working to forget what she clearly knows. It is she, after all, not Williams, who calls her uncle a slumlord. Such forgetting requires constant vigilance, endlessly inventive storytelling, and disassociation, and becomes its own self-sustaining, self-defended project. When Williams threatens that project she strikes (or is perceived by B. as striking) at no less than B.'s idea of *home* and *family*, those mythic spaces that, depending on the telling, prefigure or constitute the social contract.

More than one traumatic contract unfolds from the story of B. Rather than simply

making an example of B. and her out-of-control behavior, reserving the role of cool reason for herself, Williams tracks the sources of her own fierce engagement. She prepares us for this turn even in her initial telling of the anecdote. Rather than beginning with an impassioned defense, angry about what B. says, Williams describes her irritation at the uninvited interruption in her professorial work, the eruption of B.'s anger in the sanctified quiet of the library. B.'s angry accusation is an insistent voice of privilege, one that shouts down the ghostly voices of the homeless Williams is trying to listen to as she writes. But it is also the voice of a student challenging her teacher's authority. When her anger threatens her student with this power she must pay by giving some of it up, by being reminded of its limits when the students goes "over her head" to complain to the dean.

Because she remains acutely aware of her own position of authority, and the bargains she's struck to get there (both of which I'll discuss further, below), Williams is able to move from her reading of the bargain B. has struck with her uncle to a story of passing and assimilation from her own family. Still meditating on family love, money, and the suffering of the middle class, Williams tells a tale of two sisters, her Great Aunt Mary, who passed for white and married a patrician of Cambridge, Massachusetts, who was one of Harvard's great supporters; and her Great Aunt Sophie, who raised, and kept secret, Mary's dark-skinned daughter from a previous marriage on the money she made as a charwoman at Harvard. After Mary's marriage ends (a story Williams leaves untold), she returns to the daughter she has abandoned and the sister she has depended upon. Williams writes:

> The gulf and yet the connection between the sisters is almost indescribable. The explicit sacrifice of family for money by each; the bonds, the tendrils, the need seeping up in odd, nonfamilial and quasi-familial ("just like family" is how the aunt who was the maid was described by the rich young men whose rooms she cleaned) expectations that were denied, in guilt, in half-conscious deference to the corruption of real family bonds. Their only contact with love, attention, and intimacy was always at the expense of their own children or family — each was in peonage to the other. There was in this a real exchange of mutual suffering. (22-23)

The story of Williams' aunts is a companion story — or sequel — to the origin story of Sophie and Austin Miller. The bill of sale, an economic contract made over Sophie's body that transforms a girl into an object whose sexuality and labor belong to her owner, is refracted through the entangled stories of the two women. Aunt Mary's marriage contract is a bargain of assimilation, passing, sexual availability, and unpaid labor made in exchange for social status and economic stability. It, too, requires the disappearance of a girl — her too-dark daughter, pawned for the length of the marriage — and her own girlhood, both incontrovertible evidence of her Blackness. Mary's sister, Aunt Sophie (the original Sophie's namesake?) plays the role of illegitimate mother, raising her sister's daughter in order to make Mary's contract possible. As a charwoman at Harvard, her work is quite literally to clean up the messes left behind by the young men training to be the new Harvard alumni/benefactors/patriarchs. Aunt Sophie's labor, like her great-grandmother's, props up and makes beautiful the social and economic structures that are the source of her own oppression.

And what of love? What if Aunt Mary loved her husband, and sacrificed familial love for matrimonial — or romantic — love? What if Aunt Sophie loved a few of the rich young men alongside her own children and her abandoned niece? And what of the

love between these two sisters, who may have their own version of this tale to tell? Here the links between this tale of two sisters and the story of B. become more clear. For love doesn't negate these traumatic contracts. It is the engine, as much as economic need, social ambition, or plain inertia, that drives them. It drives too, the forgetting that makes them possible. It's love, after all, that drives the endlessly inventive forgetting of B., and her anger and love that makes it possible for Mary to return to her family after the marriage ends (though we don't hear a word about her daughter). The *real transaction is not for "salary"* after all, *but for survival itself, for love and family and connections*. It is *a contract of primal dimensions* that, finally, makes economic stability and social acceptance and love equivalent to one another.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to look at such a contract directly. As I've traced them in the examples above, traumatic contracts work, like trauma itself, through refraction, repression, omission, and excesses of meaning — *the bonds, the tendrils, the need seeping up in odd, nonfamilial and quasi-familial* ways*...expectations that were denied, in guilt, in half-conscious deference to the corruption of real family bonds.* B.'s uncle the slumlord who builds his home by profiting from others' need and longing for shelter; Aunt Mary, who can only find a home temporarily in the white patrician world by denying her own daughter; Aunt Sophie who aids and abets her sister's passing while the rich white men of Harvard make themselves at home with her labor; B., who is angry at her teacher for dislodging her from her emotional and intellectual homes; Williams herself, with her Harvard law degree, trying to concentrate on her work: shifting from one example to another in the course of her essay, Williams teaches us how to see the

connections between these deeply different stories, the way they all revolve around traumatic intersections between love and money, home and forgetting. The *madness of their juxtaposition* not only *mimes the structure of the social text*, it mimes the way traumatic contracts are felt and seen in our daily lives. The nagging details and explosive banalities, odd stories that pile up and reach the critical mass that pulls us close, in strange and unexpected ways, to our oppressors, our opposites, our Others. Tracing these odd conjunctions through the lens of the law and her own life, Williams teaches us how to see these contracts, name the demands they make upon us, and follow them, in spite of the pressure to forget, back to our own terrible bargains.

Craziness and the professional witness

If it is so difficult to examine our traumatic contracts that we must track them in this sidelong, cumulative, anecdotal manner, then what is it like to look at, even to look *for* them, professionally, as Williams does? By "professional," I mean that Williams is paid for her work, and that the kind of work she performs in *Alchemy* is recognizable as belonging to a profession, albeit fretting at the boundaries of a discipline (or two). Her class lectures, her weekly column for *The Nation*, articles for law reviews and other scholarly journals, speeches before colleagues, and *Alchemy* itself, are all both her testimony and professional commodities. Williams' critics, as we'll see below, have often dismissed as mere histrionics the personal difficulties and emotional extremities to which she testifies in *Alchemy*. In Williams' case, this by now familiar reaction to traumatic testimony is complicated by a tacit assumption that Williams' professional

success and middle class status make such testimony inauthentic. But in Williams' case, where subject and subjectivity are so deeply entwined, the forgetting that might ordinarily support the traumatic contracts of class mobility and assimilation is continually disrupted.

Williams describes the very idea of a black, female, commercial contracts lawyer and professor as "oxymoronic." Always in the minority, and often one of the very few black women in the middle class, professional rooms in which she finds herself, Williams is constantly in danger of being treated as an example — or an exemplum — in the worst possible sense. She becomes specious evidence for arguments that disregard her reality, let alone her best interests. She is a screen upon which others (like B.) may project their fears and desires, a walking allegory for all the most current stories of blackness, women, and any number of other complications. As Johnson puts it:

> When she walks into a classroom, a clothing store, a street, an academic conference, everyone around her bristles with expectations, preconceptions, desires, fears, curiosities, defenses. This book [*Alchemy*] is an attempt to keep just to one side of those expectations, to analyze them, to reread the social order in terms of them.[23]

Another way to say this is to say that Williams shows us what it feels like, as Du Bois puts it in the opening paragraph of *Souls of Black Folk*, "to be a problem:"

> Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or I fought at Mechanicsville; or Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.[24]

Du Bois' formulation is especially good at tracking the emotional management necessary for him to bear up under these well-meaning, White-liberal questions: smiling, being interested, reducing the boil to a simmer, he mediates both his own feelings and those of the questioners, like an expert diplomat circulating at an important cocktail party.

Whether hostile or well-intentioned, this kind of attention continually places its object in the position of teacher — and a teacher with only one real subject, one that fills up the room, leaving little space for anything else. Being a law professor who, in full view of the public, self-consciously and continuously analyzes and performs the "problem" for which her body, her name and her work are a metonym increases the likelihood that Williams will be treated as an allegory in spite of her relative access to power, and her ability to write (and publish, and lecture, and teach) herself back to complexity. As a black woman, Williams can at any moment be subsumed by the phantasms of Black Woman that loom so large in the national imaginary — or by the forces of repression that give rise to such phantasms. In her everyday life Williams feels the pressure of this as a shifting from invisibility to hypervisibility.[25] She recalls, for example, law school as a time when she felt as though she were on a planet with a "dense atmosphere that muted my voice to inaudibility," while as a law professor she finds herself on "a planet with a sun as strong as a spotlight and an atmosphere so thin that my slightest murmur would travel for miles, skimming from ear to ear to ear, merrily distorting and refracting as it went" (55). When Williams follows the refractive paths of these echoes, she finds the kind of commercial and historical contracts that I have been discussing thus far.

As I have also mentioned, part of the difficulty of her work arises from the way Williams' embodied experience and identity intersects with/produces Williams' own traumatic contracts. Caught in a contemporary reprisal of Du Bois' double consciousness, Williams uses the law to bear witness to its violence, her analysis of private and social contracts fueled by her own traumatic contracts.[26] Her position gives her an acute awareness of the law's unnaturalness, the powerful ways in which it manufactures its truths and performs them. But she is also constantly aware of the ways in which her own use and critique of the law is a counter-performance that derives its power from the object it critiques.

Williams' family history is both one of the primary sources and one of the clearest illustrations of these tensions. Williams is literally a product of the traumatic contract that made Sophie into a raped, pregnant slave, and Sophie's sale may be the catalyst for her work, but it is Austin Miller's legacy that she inherits when she becomes a lawyer: Her mother soothes her jitters on the first day of Harvard law school by reminding her that she has "the law in her blood" (216). Read in light of Williams' use of Sophie's sale as an example of law, her mother's reassurance passes beyond tragic irony to resonate as a traumatic fact. It also, Williams notes, means that she has been encouraged by her own mother to disown her maternal heritage, to side with her mother's shame and the oppressive historical structures that continue to create it, even as she does her mother proud by going off to Harvard. The story of her aunts also implicates Harvard, that golden ticket to power and access, as a site and source of familial trauma. Williams tells us she grew up "under the rather schizophrenic tutelage" of these two aunts, and that

schizophrenia is her inheritance. Borrowing from the talents of Aunt Mary, she passes as a degreed professional; following Aunt Sophie, she champions the dark, rejected daughters of the passing class.

Between her own traumatic contracts and the projections of others', Williams is in a difficult position. In fact, it all drives her a little crazy. In addition to schizophrenia, Williams suffers from hallucinations of polar bears, depression, hysteria, paranoia, and any number of other madnesses.[27] In *Alchemy*, Williams uses madness as a figure for the tensions produced by her own traumatic contracts, the emotional states resulting from encounters with others, like B., for whom her body or her work raise hallucinations of the repressed, and finally, from the permeability of self that results from bearing witness to the all-pervasive from within both these sites.

Williams introduces her readers to the crazy-making effects of professional witnessing in the opening pages of *Alchemy*, beginning with the first sentence after its parable/epigraph: "Since subject position is everything in my analysis of the law, you deserve to know that it's a bad morning. I am very depressed… I'm sitting up in bed reading about redhibitory vices… The case I'm reading is an 1835 decision from Louisiana involving the redhibitory vice of craziness" (3). Redhibitory vices are defects in merchandise known to the seller that allow the purchaser to return his purchase. The case is that of a slave woman, Kate, whose new owner wishes to return her after she has demonstrated her madness by running away. The seller contends "that Kate was not crazy but only stupid," but the judge rules against him and in the buyer's favor, noting that "We are satisfied the slave in question was wholly, and perhaps worse than, useless."

As though she has contracted Kate's "craziness," and in despair at such reasonable legal discourse, Williams writes:

> As I said, this is the sort of morning when I hate being a lawyer, a teacher, and just about everything else in my life. It's all I can do to feed the cats. I let my hair stream wildly and the eyes roll back in my head.
>
> So you should know that this is one of those mornings when I refuse to compose myself properly; you should know you are dealing with someone who is writing this in an old terry bathrobe with a little fringe of blue and white tassles dangling from the hem, trying to decide if she is stupid or crazy. (4)

This is a carefully constructed performance, right down to the pun on "compose." Williams' self-portrait, streaming hair, rolling eyes, bathrobe, and all, is a comedically stereotypical picture of a madwoman. But it is also a performance, as Kate's presence insists, of yet another black woman in *Alchemy* who is running away, crazy, falsely accused, trapped, the tragically stereotypical picture of a black woman.

It is a performance has been lost on many of *Alchemy*'s reviewers. In a review for the *New Republic* that is both emblematic of and more perceptive than much of Williams' bad press, it is the suspicion that Williams is in control of her own image that ultimately causes sociologist Jonathan Rieder to reject her as "inauthentic," "narcissistic," and "arrogant." Though he can see that Williams "is always parading personae" and that "[i]n her own telling she is a melodramatic, histrionic personality, forever alert to the effect of her performances on others," he concludes not that he himself might be one of these others, or that this performance might be rooted in experience and directed toward him for the serious purpose of reclaiming and shaping that experience, but that Williams is acting in bad faith:

> Either she is "crazy," and her musings on race are paranoid and hysterical, or she

is just gaming, playing with the posture of being crazy, and thus playing with us. In which case, her self-proclaimed radical honesty is just a language game, and carries no warrant of truth.[28]

It is no accident that Rieder's objections rest on the assumption that language is either stable or it isn't, and that its instability is within Williams' control, rather than contingent on what she is trying to say. If the truths she offers are valid, he implies, she would be able to state them plainly.

Rieder seems to write brilliantly of how Williams is caught up in trauma's field: "Williams can't stop reliving primal hurts. As a result she can never experience time, or citizenship, in the way that white Americans do — in a shared way. The present is an arena of endless repetitions." But in Rieder's stable world, these repetitive scenes are of Williams own conjuring, the result of a "politics of obsessive, resentful memory that distorts American reality, denies the reality of change, and bristles with an insistence of difference." The endless repetitions Williams sees are "a projection of the self," and her struggles "provide a stark warning: the consciousness of race is not only a way to recover the self, it is also a way to consume it." Rieder is insightful about the way that Williams' burden of witness consumes her, but what he misses is its essentially involuntary nature. He confuses her vision of the world with its vision of her, reading the burden of witness as paranoia, and pedagogical performance as a taunt.[29]

But Williams is like the rest of us. She too would like to choose when to go unnoticed. She too is tempted, at great personal cost, by the bargain to forget and to be forgotten, a desire she documents poignantly in stories of the way her father, who lived through desegregation, but who could never quite believe in his new rights, has passed

down to her a disproportionate gratefulness "for the allowance just to be" to anonymous strangers in the ordinary commerce of her day. She too struggles between the longing for community and traumatic contracts of exclusion that seem necessary to get it. It's a longing that tempts her into keeping unaccountably silent while a gaggle of young boutique clerks make a series of anti-Semitic remarks, giggling to themselves about the other customer — and that's it, of course; for once it's the *other* customer — in the store. She would like to try to turn a blind eye, and does — *must*, occasionally, if only because she is human, if only from the sheer exhaustion she sums up in the statement: "I can't kill and I can't teach everyone." On the other hand, she tells us, "I can't pretend it doesn't bother me, it eats me alive." (128-9)

Underlying this exhaustion and compulsion is the encompassing nature of Williams' project. Though Williams herself locates Sophie's bill of sale as the catalyst for her work, a shock that gives Williams her vision, Williams' family stories are just a single strand of *Alchemy*'s complicated narrative web. As a whole, *Alchemy* balks at any simple notions of inner/outer, private/public, notions that Williams associates directly with the "spirit-murdering" binaries of property/owner, and object/being. She see reflections of herself everywhere not because she's narcissistic, as Rieder suggests, but because she is working against the everyday exclusions and privatization that would make her individual traumatic experience discrete from the historical or contemporaneous experiences of others. Tracking all-pervasive trauma leads Williams toward a state where everything that happens everywhere matters personally. This may be a desirable ethical state, but its nearly impossible to sustain. Is there a way out of Williams' double

bind besides willful forgetting? Is it, finally, impossible to make one's living as a professional witness to quotidian trauma without going finally, completely crazy?

Radical remembering, gift economies, and word magic

There are two moments in *Alchemy* when the loss of boundaries that usually signals trauma's rupture begins to signal something else: first, a kind of radical remembering that is the precursor to the suffering individual's expansion beyond a private self; and second, the building of an imperfect, treasured community whose exchanges of goods and services stands as the fragile beginning of an answer to the commercial violence Williams tracks elsewhere. The first of these moments happens in a striking burst of lyric energy that seems at first as though it will defeat the argument with which the essay began. "The Pain of Word Bondage" lies at the heart of *Alchemy*, and directly addresses the reactionary mixture of race and rights in its title. In it, Williams addresses the Critical Legal Studies critique of rights discourse as fundamentally unstable and indeterminate. In particular, she takes issue with the argument that a rhetoric of "needs" based on informal, community-based social agreement should be substituted for the rhetoric of "rights," whose subjects seek reparation and power as private citizens under the law.

Peter Gabel and the other CLS scholars Williams cites see the privatization required by rights as abstraction and alienation, a selling of the self to the law. This concern seems as though it would echo Williams' deep concerns over the transformation of beings into property, transformation she tracks outward from slavery. But Williams

argues that precisely because of that history, blacks are not willing to abandon the promise of rights in exchange for informal social connection. Williams outlines the way, in the light of slavery, lynching, rape, and the thousand less obvious acts of violent social alienation blacks experience everyday, underground social connection has meant "not untrammeled vistas of possibility but the crushing weight of total — bodily and spiritual — *intrusion*" (emphasis in the original). The loss of boundaries, as we have seen, is intimately bound up with trauma for Williams. Rights promise to restore these boundaries, providing "islands of empowerment" in the law.

Williams is well aware that these islands are as unstable and potentially alienating as social life is for blacks. But even when the promise of rights is not fulfilled, even when it appears to be an obviously poor political strategy, in the context of African-American political struggle, Williams argues, the rhetoric of rights remains powerful:

> "Rights" feels new in the mouths of most black people. It is still deliciously empowering to say. It is the magic wand of visibility and invisibility, of inclusion and exclusion, or power and no power. The concept of rights, both positive and negative, is the marker of our citizenship, our relation to others. (164)

But faith in the magic of language to control "visibility and invisibility…inclusion and exclusion," Wendy Brown argues, may simply be a symptom of the powerlessness to control that crazymaking invisibility and hypervisibility, one that serves to promote the problem, rather than solve it.

Like the arguments Williams addresses from CLS, Brown's critique turns on the conflict between Williams' critique of privatization and her championship of rights. Brown sees rights discourse as fenced by paradoxes, primary among which is that the citizen who seeks redress from the law for historical injuries through the attainment of

rights loses the ability to speak of those wrongs the moment s/he enters into rights discourse and becomes a private, universal individual:

> Rights discourse in liberal capitalist culture casts as private potentially political contests about distribution of resources and about relevant parties to decision making. It converts social problems into matters of individualized, dehistoricized, injury and entitlement, into matters in which there is no harm if there is no agent and no tangibly violated subject.[30]

In Brown's analysis, rights discourse is a trap for all of those who seek rights as a way to protect themselves from the kind of hypervisibility and absolute vulnerability Williams describes, for "the same device that confers legitimate boundary and privacy leaves the individual to struggle alone, in a self-blaming and depoliticized universe." In fact, working through Foucault, she sees the traumatic deprivation of boundaries Williams describes as "not merely lack, but the creation of desire through lack," one symptom of which is Williams' turn to the literary:

> The unnavigable "choice" between exposure and hiding clearly calls for redress through social practices that accord black women autonomy and privacy, agency and respect. But perhaps, heeding a Focaultian appreciation of subject formation, this violent legacy also takes shape as a complex form of desire in the subjects it creates, a desire symptomized in Patricia Williams' deeply personal and quasi-confessional writing. Indeed, how else to explain her production of our *intrusion* into her morning toilette — her *exposure* of how with astringent, mascara and lip glaze she hangs her face in contradictions…and in this way restages the scene of invasion, the absence of bodily privacy that is the history of African-American women…[31]

Brown understands that Williams' "quasi-confessional" mode is a performance, but her diagnosis of it as a symptom of desire and a re-enactment of traumatic intrusion denies

the possibility that such a deliberately controlled re-enactment might be a source of freedom and power and leaves Williams tainted by the brush of traumatic compulsion, even hysteria.

A similar reluctance to see the literary and ultimately, literary theory, as a productive space in which to *begin* undoing — or at least working with and through — the paradoxes embedded in rights discourse causes Brown to disparage Williams' faith in the magical, or as I'll explore below, the *alchemical* properties of language. Reading a much abbreviated excerpt of the passage I'll address below, Brown worries that the "risk…is that the appreciation of the power and flexibility of the word afforded by recent literary theory may have converged with what Marx identified as liberalism's theological impulses to exaggerate a sense of what can be accomplished with words."[32]

Brown is acutely aware of the valences of asking the injured to forget their injuries. Indeed, she cites *Alchemy* as an example of a "quite powerful phenomenological exploration of the relationship between historical erasure and lived identity." [33] She takes Williams' legal analysis seriously as traumatic testimony, and her argument draws out some of the fundamental paradoxes of Williams' arguments and is an acute diagnosis of the dangers inherent to a political strategy that attempts to take trauma as its departure point. But to dismiss the transformative power of language in "The Pain of Word Bondage" is to miss the point of the essay, beginning with its title. The essay is, in large part, *about* the way language can become a repository for desire, hope, and the history that is behind those desires and hopes. When Williams offers her own way out of legal alienation, she does so with one of the most lyrically resonant series of passages in

Alchemy.

Williams begins with Christopher Stone's notion that our understanding of rights must be expanded to efface the line between animate and inanimate objects — the same line that made it possible to forget Sophie's humanity. This is a kind of radical, even mystical remembering that reaches its climax as Williams re-appropriates the explicitly mystical image of a wound that has come to stand for sentimentality, and an unthinking privileging of suffering: the bleeding heart. Before the Reformation, Williams tells us, the bleeding heart "was the Christian symbol of one who could 'feel the spirit move inside all property. Everything on earth is a gift and God is the vessel. Our small bodies may be expanded; we need not confine the blood.'" [34] This is the other side of the tear in reality signified by the traumatic wound and the radical isolation of the trauma survivor. In the symbology of Williams' essay, the bleeding heart is a wound that signifies connection, and numinous sharing. [35]

It is through this kind of sharing that Williams finds her way back to rights. "In discarding rights altogether," she argues, "one discards a symbol too deeply enmeshed in the psyche of the oppressed to lose without trauma and much resistance." Instead, Williams incants, "society must *give* them away. Unlock them from reification by giving them to slaves. Give them to trees. Give them to cows. Give them to history. Give them to rivers and rocks…all of society's objects and untouchables…" By remembering the spirit that moves within all property, we may, as Williams writes in the last sentence of the essay "wash away the shrouds of inanimate-object status so that we may say not that we own gold but that a luminous golden spirit owns us" (165).

This is not a legal theory, or a political strategy, or sentimental transcendence or even utopian philosophy. It is a story, one that draws on all of the latter, and then adds the powerful inherited poetry of Christianity to its alchemical mix, not reaching past the law but exposing the law's sacred roots and the place of the wounded heart within the divine rhetoric that gives contemporary law much of its semantic resonance. The final lines of Williams' essay are a direct reference back to *Alchemy*'s title: Alchemists originally sought the secret of turning ordinary metals to gold not for profit, but because the metal *was* a golden spirit: chemistry and mysticism, science and art, matter and spirit related through the magic of symbolism in an explicitly tangible way, one we may think is foreign to late modernity.[36] Bringing the African American history of racial abuse to the unstable abstraction of rights, Williams makes an argument both for the tangibility of their symbolism, and for their malleability. This is not a new idea in *Alchemy*. It is simply a limit case for the kind alchemical change Williams effects by bringing her particular testimony about the everyday trauma of race to the law.

The dream of re-awakening the spirits within earthly property is emphatically different from the more usual heavenly golden reward for suffering: becoming one with God after death.[37] Williams' is a dream of the future meant not only to fuel the energies of those in the present, but to give a shape and a story to the complicated passions of those currently living who derive their energy from the past-oriented attachments that Brown and CLS recommend giving up. Death and afterlife nevertheless hover insistently around the scene above, as they do in the second much quieter moment I want to turn to now, a moment when mourning and the possibility of a community come together.

At the heart of "On Being the Object of Property," the final essay in *Alchemy*, is a small story about the death of Williams' godmother, Marjorie. As she sits in the hospital at her godmother's deathbed, Williams finds herself at a loss for what to say to a woman she loves dearly, who has already slipped beyond conversation. She tells her godmother tales of law and gift exchange and handmade goods until her happiness resolves into elegy:

> …I told her about market norms and gift economy and the thin razor's edge of the bartering ethic. Once upon a time, I rambled, some neighbors included me in their circle of barter. They were in the habit of exchanging eggs and driving lessons, hand-knit sweaters and computer programming, plumbing and calligraphy. I accepted the generosity of their inclusion with gratitude. At first I felt that, as a lawyer, I was worthless, that I had no barterable skills and nothing to contribute. What I came to realize, however, was that my value to the group was not calculated by the physical items I brought to it. These people included me because they wanted me to be part of their circle; they valued my participation apart from the material things I could offer. So I gave of myself to them, and they gave me fruit cakes and dandelion wine and smoked salmon and, in their giving, their goods became provisions. Cradled in this community whose currency was a relational ethic, my stock in myself soared. My value depended on the glorious intangibility, the eloquent invisibility, of my just being part of the collective — and in direct response I grew spacious and happy and gentle.
>
> My gentle godmother. The fragility of life; the cold mortuary shelf. (230)

In "The Pain of Word Bondage" Williams reaches the point where she can imagine banishing inanimate-object status by first imagining an economy of power and selfhood based on expansion and giving. In this fairy tale, too, it is the fragile but lovely possibilities of bartering and gift economy that ease the alienation and anxiety of individualism and the traumatic contracts of private property, replacing them with everyday objects, work, and *the eloquent invisibility of…just being part of the collective.*

But it wouldn't be much of a story, really, were it not for the presence of the

dying woman who may or may not be listening. Marjorie, Williams tells us, is the one who taught her how to tell stories. Sitting beside her, feeding her and caring for her over the weeks it takes for her to die, is "not only a rite of nurture and sacrifice" but "the return of a gift."

> It was a quiet bowing to the passage of time and the doubling back of all things. The quiet woman who listened to my woes about work and school required now that I bend my head down close to her and listen for mouthed word fragments, sentence crumbs. I bent down to give meaning to her silence, her wandering search for words. (229)

The possibility of a gift economy is also the possibility of love — love and redemption. For Marjorie is Aunt Mary's discarded too-dark daughter, and the story of her as loving and beloved is an odd kind of happy ending to the schizophrenia of the two sisters. The relationship between Marjorie and Williams is the bright companion to the traumatic contract that runs the relationship between B. and her uncle. As a godmother Marjorie is bound to Williams less by blood or money or law than by a promise to act in the spirit of motherhood — a promise she fulfills, and that Williams fulfills in return.

If Marjorie is a fairy godmother, the magic she weaves is absence, but its not a forgetting, it's a mourning space in which "the emptiness of words" becomes clear, becomes a relief. For Williams this is the obverse of the traumatic unspeakable. It's a space where words — and therefore law — can't reach:

> The truth, the truth, I would laughingly insist as we sat in her apartment eating canned fruit and heavy roasts, mashed potatoes, pickles and vanilla pudding, cocoa, Sprite or tea. What about roots and all that, I coaxed. But the voracity of her amnesia would disclaim and disclaim — and she would go on telling me about polar bears until our plates were full of emptiness and I became large in the space that described her emptiness and I gave in to the emptiness of words. (228)

The kind of hyper-awareness that Williams portrays herself as caught up in throughout *Alchemy* can itself be seen as an effect of trauma. Marjorie's amnesia holds out the possibility that storytelling may also be a way to defer this painful sensitivity. But it's also important to note that, while the lines between survivor and bystander are often difficult to follow in *Alchemy*, Marjorie belongs to the past about which Williams tells her stories. Williams bears witness to the discarded dark daughters, herself among them, but Marjorie is the original story, the source of the parable. It's a difference we must consider when comparing Marjorie's "voracity for amnesia" versus Williams' demand for "the truth! The truth!" for Marjorie's storytelling marks the difference between willful forgetting and mourning — and it is mourning, finally, that she teaches to Williams along with her polar bear tales, while working the ordinary alchemy of home cooking.

Quotidian trauma, ordinary witness

Can we live without traumatic contracts? Probably not — no more, anyway, than we can live without trauma itself. But just as the relatively simple act of framing *Alchemy* with this theoretical structure prevents us from dismissing Williams and helps us to understand some of the more inconsistent turns in her argument, watching for ghosts, learning just how high the prices of these bad bargains are might help us to navigate that which would otherwise remain invisible. Thinking of her own sometime silence, and the losses she has incurred — friends, family, sleep, different ideas of home — Williams speaks of "the hard work of a nonracist sensibility" that is also finally "the ambivalent, multivalent way of seeing, that is at the core of what is called critical theory, feminist

theory, and much of the minority critique of law."

> I think that the hard work...is the boundary crossing, from safe circle into wilderness: the testing of boundary, the consecration of sacrilege. It is the willingness to spoil a good party and break an encompassing circle, to travel from the safe to the unsafe. The transgression is dizzyingly intense, a reminder of what it is to be alive. It is a sinful pleasure, this willing transgression of a line, which takes one into new awareness, a secret, lonely, and tabooed world — to survive the transgression is terrifying and addictive. To know that everything has changed and that nothing has changed; and in leaping the chasm of this impossible division of self, a discovery of the self surviving, still well, still strong, and, as a curious consequence, renewed. (130)

Williams' description of this hard work can, I think, serve as a definition of the work of bearing witness to another's testimony, the work of deliberately encountering the trauma stories of others, and of breaking the silence that surrounds the traumatic contracts we make and the contracts others have made that depend upon our silence. What I love about this formulation is that it sugarcoats neither the dangers nor the pleasures of the work of witness — it is both holy and sinful; it requires bravery, but is also the result of compulsion. It makes us feel irrelevant, bored, overwhelmed, but it also inspires shamanic visions/delusions of grandeur and (temporary) transcendence. This is not "healing" in the sense of "getting over it," "getting past it," or "moving on." It does not pretend we will ever be able to see things the same way again without fooling ourselves. It creates change that is both impossibly large and imperceptible. It *is* an endless struggle, one that transforms traumatic repetition into work, ultimately the most ordinary work, that must be done anew every day: "Each day a new labor" (130).

[1]Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (BasicBooks, New York:1992), 1.

[2]The Psychiatric Association's 1987 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM III-R) defined trauma as "an event outside the range of normal human experience." Feminist clinicians like Herman and Laura S. Brown made a successful argument for revising this definition by pointing to the tragically common experience of rape and abuse for women. Herman outlines this struggle in Chapter 5 of *Trauma and Recovery*. Brown recapitulates this argument in "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma" collected in Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 1995).

[3]"The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to brink about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as the historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge — unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable." Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*; edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt; translated by Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, New York:1969), 257.

[4]Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (Routledge, New York: 1992), 11.

[5]Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: The Diary of a Law Professor* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA: 1991). All future references in text from this edition.

[6]I began this project uninterested in questions about genre, but the question of genre continued to be interested in me. Including Williams in a dissertation on American literature meant creating the term "literary testimony," since I could not easily sum up my texts as "literature." Every committee or person before whom I have come to defend or explain this project has had a reaction, positive or negative, to my treating *Alchemy* as literary text. Given Williams' playful arguments with the Library of Congress (256-7) over how to classify her book and her attention throughout *Alchemy* to the connections between style, affect, politics, and power, I think she would take some delight in the way her methodology kept messing up any easy shortcuts I wanted to take in my own.

[7]Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis: 1997), 6.

[8]Avital Ronell has theorized TV as a traumatic medium. See "Trauma TV: 12 Steps

Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *Finitude's Score : Essays for the End of the Millennium* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln: 1994). Certainly a channel like CNN is driven by the iconic repetition of catastrophic imagery and fragmented narratives of crisis, perpetually interrupted by calls to relieve the anxieties just produced by going shopping for the items advertised in between stories. The movement from anxiety to shopping is echoed by Williams in her lectures and stories of her own shopping excursions. See 26, 44-51, and 125-128.

[9]Thus my descriptive mode here, the delay in presenting examples of what I am describing. It's difficult to parse Williams' work, since it resists the hierarchies implicit in a summary. This difficulty is easy to see in the critical use of Williams' work elsewhere. Though many scholars have acknowledged Williams' influence, few have devoted an entire chapter or article to her work, preferring to either gloss her as a whole, or use her work aphoristically, in epigraphs or the occasional quote.

[10]In her latest work on autobiography and testimony, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001) Leigh Gilmore names the new breed of memoir + scholarship being practiced scholars "personal criticism," and points to the examples including Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Frank Letricchia's *The Edge of Night* (New York: Random House, 1994); Nancy K. Miller's *Bequest and Betrayal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), as well as memoirs by Susan Rubin Suleiman, Marianne Torgovnick, Jane Tompkins, and the collection *Confessions of the Critics,* ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1996).
Even more relevant here is that Williams' style is a typical — though extreme — example of critical race scholars such as Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Kimberle Crenshaw. For an excellent survey of the movement and its style see *Critical Race Theory: the Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberle Crenshaw (New York : New Press : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1995) and *Critical Race Theory: an Introduction*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, (New York: New York University Press, 2001). The creation of a new genre does not, however, negate the transgression inherent in Williams' strategy. Rather, it points to a certain historical moment, one in which the law (and other theoretical domains) is being practiced, and practiced upon, by those whose stories it has been designed to exclude.

[11]This suggestion appears in a composite rejection letter (see note below) crafted by Williams, but she claims that the letter is made up of actual quotes from various rejections. Complaints from *Alchemy*'s reviewers indicate that Williams does not exaggerate the resistance with which her work meets. Even readers who welcome Williams' ventures outside traditional legal studies often miss the fact that Williams is trying to rupture the hierarchies between theory and example with her literary experiments. Instead, they welcome what they designate her "confessional" style and lament that it is burdened by tiresome critical jargon. Barbara Johnson (see note below)

provides an excellent critique of one such review by Wendy Kaminer (*New York Times Book Review,* May 26, 1991; 10).

[12]Barbara Johnson, "The Alchemy of Style," in *The Feminist Difference:Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA: 1998). Johnson's essay is situated in the midst of the kind of power struggle Williams' details: Johnson had hoped to base her essay on a rejection letter from the Harvard Law Review which Harvard Press refused, barring HLR's consent, to allow Williams to publish. Johnson writes of her surprise and disappointment upon encountering the substituted composite rejection and uses this moment as the catalyst for her essay.

[13]ibid, 169

[14]Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Book Review: *The Alchemy of Race and Rights,*" *The Nation*, June 10 1991 v 252 n22 p766(5).

[15]See Williams' discussion of Pierson vs. Post, (156-7).

[16]"About the American Law Institute" http://www.ali.org/, accessed March 22, 2003.

[17]ibid

[18]Williams writes a bi-weekly column for *The Nation* called "Diary of a Mad Law Professor." The latter — significantly minus the "Mad" — is also *Alchemy*'s subtitle.

[19]When I first read *Alchemy* I did so from the point of view of Williams' white middle class students. I had recently been in the classroom of a teacher suffering badly from the kind of racialized and gendered dissonance that Williams documents, and it had been a difficult experience, one which had driven the students — a demographically diverse group of women — to compulsive analysis. It was a true encounter with quotidian trauma (on both sides, I came to find out later), and one of the series of encounters with racial trauma that made it possible/imperative to carry out this project.

[20]In a rare instance of open debate in Congress on the responsibilities of the rich to the poor (as a result of George W. Bush's tax cut proposal) Jesse Helms, who is always good for a representative quote, countered claims that the rich owe part of their wealth to the poor who work for them with almost precisely these words: "The greatest problem in this country is not the greed of the rich. The greatest problem in this nation is envy!" ("All Things Considered," NPR February, 2001.)

[21]Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA: 1988). See especially 55-68. Pateman's work makes a fascinating counterpoint to Williams, as she explores the degree to which Hobbes recognized the social contract as a slave

contract from its inception, but one that rested on the productive labor of women, rather than slaves per se.

[22]Lauren Berlant would add normative gender and sexuality to this brief list. I'm thinking here of her work in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997) on the "deep shadow" of heterosexual privacy, vs. the scrutiny homosexual or "deviant" sex undergoes. See especially 59-60, 70-71, 77-81.

[23]Johnson, 168

[24]W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: New American Library, 1995; 43-44.
Souls of Black Folk is a kind of shadow text for *Alchemy*. Written by a sociologist, it stakes many of the same kinds of claims for the literary within its discipline, and it is comprised of equally heterogeneous genres: memoir, songs, fiction, parable, history as well as analysis. It is also, quite famously/notoriously, pedagogical in its intent. Avery Gordon also recognizes Du Bois as a fellow tracker of ghosts, alongside Williams.

[25]Williams also records the way she shifts from being "not-black for purposes of inclusion to black for purposes of exclusion" (9-10). I have borrowed from Avery Gordon's discussion of hybervisibility and invisibility 16-18 in *Ghostly Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[26]Williams discusses the break in her psyche by which she first understood herself to be black in terms of schizophrenia, see 212-13 in *Alchemy*. For Du Bois' famous formulation see *Souls of Black Folk*, 45. Strikingly, Du Bois' formulation is tied far more explicitly to nationalism, to *being and American*, than Williams'.

[27]See 204-5, 208-9, 214 for references to fear of craziness, schizophrenia in addition to the story of the two aunts, and the initial appearance of the polar bears. For paranoia see (14) among other examples.

[28]Jonathan Rieder, "Book Review: *The Alchemy of Race and Rights.*" *The New Republic,* Oct. 21, 1991 v205 n17 p39(4).

[29]ibid. Rieder is essentially asking Williams to forget, and in doing so he asks her to participate in another traumatic contract — to forget her past and her self in exchange for love, connection, and recognition, a type of bargain that should by now be deeply familiar and disturbing.

[30]Wendy Brown, *States of injury : Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J: 1995), 124.

[31]ibid, 126.

[32]ibid, 127.

[33]ibid, 74 and note 41.

[34]Williams, 161. Williams is quoting here from Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 139.

[35]The symbology of the sacred heart in its proper historical context may be another thing altogether, but what interests me here is Williams' particular use of the image. There is, however, a rich series of overlapping rhetorics between mystic religious rhetoric, particularly that of the medieval Christian mystics, and the rhetoric of trauma. In my next project, I plan to explore the residues of this imagery as it appears in contemporary language of trauma.

[36]Alchemy seems to have retained its status as a site of interdisciplinarity. My quick survey of Internet sites on alchemy revealed many web pages from chemistry departments who see Alchemy as a kind of proto-chemistry, but there were also many sites featuring the kind of Trekkie space where the worship of technology crosses over into a worship of magic and fantasy. As Johnson notes through her epigraphs from Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, and a selection from Walter Benjamin, the use of alchemy as a metaphor for the transformative power of writing has an illustrious history.

[37]It is remarkably similar, however, to James Clifford's call for the re-fetishization of stolen/sacred objects collected by museums, which I discussed in my previous chapter. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988; 215-248. See particularly 224.

Chapter Four

Crisis and Everyday Learning: Toward a Pedagogy of Witness

> I would venture to propose, today, that teaching in itself, teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of a (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps *not truly taught*: it has perhaps passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents, with which the students or the audience — the recipients — can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with information that kept coming forth but that no one could *recognize*, and that no one could therefore truly *learn, read* or *put to use*.
>
> Looking back at the experience of the class, I therefore think that my job as a teacher, paradoxical as it may sound, was that of creating in the class the highest state of crisis that it could withstand, without "driving the students crazy" — without compromising the students' boundaries.
>
> Shoshana Felman, "Education and Crisis"[1]

What is the place of trauma in the literature classroom? How does it make its presence felt? What does trauma have to do with learning, and specifically, with learning about and from literature? Can teachers and students recognize trauma's presence and engage with it productively — intellectually and affectively? Should they? Why might they want to try?

In this chapter, I turn to a set of narratives about teaching and trauma, beginning with Shoshana Felman's "Education and Crisis," in order to offer some alternatives to the pedagogy of crisis she promotes above as the only way in which "true teaching" may happen. My alternative model grows out of the quotidian aspects of trauma I have elaborated upon in my previous three chapters. In those chapters I demonstrated some of the ways in which the literatures of oppression and resistance invite their readers to see the ways in which trauma permeates the everyday lives of both its survivors and those who consider themselves mere bystanders. Here, I will continue to argue, as I have

throughout, that trauma is present whether or not we recognize it, and that whether or not we attempt to engage with it, it will engage with us.

I also demonstrated how the subjective, specific evidence of things otherwise not seen produced by this *literary* testimony both disrupts and adds to the body of knowledge claimed by social sciences — social work, psychotherapy, anthropology, and law. Social sciences' historical investments in empiricism, objectivity, and other theoretical frameworks for producing "real world" knowledge and praxis produces certain hysterical blind spots that flatten and amputate the testimony to traumas that they gather. In each of the cases I examined, this blindness was intimately connected to an understanding of trauma as predicated on or synonymous with *crisis*.[2] I identified the narrative and stylistic strategies Allison, Alexie, and Williams employed to answer this insistence on crisis with an equal insistence on the complex, quotidian nature of trauma.[3] In each case, the author's disarticulation of trauma from crisis was fundamental to creating the kind of literary testimony that invites the readers to move from the position of (not so) innocent bystander, to the more productive and ethical, if more personally troubling, position of implicated witness. Under a pedagogy of witness, as I attempt to sketch it here, a similar disarticulation of trauma from crisis in the classroom would make it easier for both students and teachers to take up the offer to witness extended by these texts and others like them, and to draw testimony from other, more reluctant texts.

Disarticulating crisis from trauma in the literature classroom is not an easy thing. It may seem counterintuitive, even unethical, within a framework where trauma, crisis, truth, and action are irrevocably linked. Felman's call to crisis is, in part, worth

addressing precisely because it is nothing new. Critics within and without trauma studies have consistently framed trauma narratives as the precursor to a call for action, or as the call for action itself. When this reading is not explicit, it is implicit in the rhetoric of "finding a voice/breaking a silence/speaking for those who cannot speak," a rhetoric in which giving testimony is itself a political act of representation (of both events and people), with the pedagogical intent to teach disbelieving others, enemies, and neutral bystanders the truth. Taken to the extreme, under this rubric literature is merely another form of testimony (though suspect for its commitment to the fictive), one whose purpose is to provide the shock necessary to penetrate apathy and bring to crisis feelings of outrage, guilt, and so on, and send the reader seeking relief into a/the "real world" — the world of social and political action outside the book, the classroom. Critiques of passive, apathetic readers/bystanders who are reluctant to engage with narratives of oppression and trauma abound, as do critiques of texts that are too "easy," that somehow pander to their readers, or "let them off the hook" of this kind of crisis-driven encounter. (Books that sell well — like *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *Reservation Blues*, whose canny engagement with the codified versions of their trauma stories no doubt had something to do with their *New York Times* bestseller status — are especially suspect.)

When I turned to the field of education to look for work on trauma and pedagogy in preparation for writing this chapter, I found that the kind of situation I was trying to describe either went unnamed, or reappeared implicitly under code words such as "controversy," "ideological texts," or "diversity."[4] Much of this work, too, was structured around the appearance and management of crisis. The title of Helen Brown's

When Race Breaks Out is a good example of this tendency, which has its roots in cognitive dissonance theory, a schema for predicting how people behave when presented with the shock of new information that fundamentally contradicts their world view, and in developmental theories of confrontation and assimilation that posit shock, anger, and resistance will ultimately be followed by reintegration.[5] Relying on the idea of a shock or crisis both fuels and is fueled by a bias toward the management of white, heterosexual, middle class guilt, outrage, and resistance to learning about "others," while developmental theories risk framing the anger and resistance of minorities as "merely a stage." The management of both groups' emotions ultimately, if unintentionally, repeats the familiar stratagem of using the experiences of marginalized and oppressed groups for the self-enrichment of the oppressor.[6] Additionally, the emphasis on crisis management, as I will discuss below, makes it difficult to recognize the degree to which the effects of trauma have been present all along, even when they are not "breaking out," and, concurrently, the degree to which trauma, oppression and injustice are not things happening elsewhere, or brought to life by the teacher and class, but always present.[7]

Social activism and personal reflection are vital and necessary components of the social work towards change that must take place (and be maintained) in order to address the injustices associated with trauma and oppression. But just as personal reflection does not necessarily result in more ethical action, crisis alone does not insure, or even necessarily call for, action. As I will demonstrate, the use of crisis to overcome student apathy can result in the foreclosure of a trauma narrative's complexity and is as likely to create a facile, self-congratulatory certainty that students "know" all about whatever

trauma is addressed as it is to spur students to action. And action is not, of course, in and of itself, a good. In the wake of September 11, for example, the clearest call to action was the call to make war, while the more complex call for peace, a call to resist action, to wait, reflect, mourn — in short, to bear witness to the event itself — was easily vilified as passivity. (This was, as always, a highly gendered critique. Indeed, outside of any specific example, we might be wary of the opposition between good action and bad passivity itself, given the consistent alignment and valorization of masculinity and strength with activity versus the excoriation/enforcement of weak, feminine passivity.)

Without denying the great need for social action, what I want to examine here are the valuable ways in which learning and teaching help us to resist action, and to temporarily trade that need to act for the kind of reading and reflection that increases the possibility of bearing witness when we do act. Trauma's uncanny ability to replicate itself — the degree to which those caught up in its field find themselves acting out variations on the roles of perpetrator or victim — occurs in no small part because those bystanders find the "passivity" of witnessing unbearable. When we disarticulate trauma from crisis in the literature classroom we open up the possibility for seeing the potentially endless processes of reading and reflection, the repetitive forgetting and relearning, the writing and rewriting, the slow acceptance of ambiguity, ambivalence, and relativity and rejection of simple truths and transparency that are the everyday experiences of learning to read well, as one way to practice performing this unbearable task.

Most teachers are familiar with a kind of faith that is fundamental to taking up the burden of witness: the faith that teaching has an effect, and that learning works, subtly,

deeply, over the long-term. They are rarely able to track their students for any great length of time, and even when they are, the "results" of any change in political philosophy or actions taken can hardly be attributed directly to any one class or person given the complexity of such thinking processes, even when the students themselves make the attribution. In fact, the insistent rhetoric of social action and crisis may point less to the necessity for such a method in the classroom, than it does, as I will discuss in my reading of Felman, to the fear and desire for visible proof, within the brief time span of a typical semester, that *something has happened* — some kind of action/activism has taken place, the teacher has achieved her or his aim of transformation through learning.

Perhaps most importantly, such "proof" salves the double bind teachers of literary testimony find ourselves in when we try to serve the twin imperatives that govern our work: to bear witness to truths that are actively repressed by mainstream discourse; and to honor both the complexity of the texts we teach and that of our students, who are often deeply allied with mainstream discourse. In what follows, I examine some of the ways in which this double bind works upon Felman in "Education and Crisis," and in responses to her essay by Kali Tal and Megan Boler.[8] Then, building on Boler's attention to the nexus between education and emotion I turn to the problematics of teachers' anger through a discussion of traumatic transference and readings of several teaching and learning narratives, including some from my personal experience. My hope is that in addition to outlining a pedagogical practice, I can demonstrate how an explicit recognition of trauma's presence in the classroom may make visible the additional political, social, intellectual, and emotional work of teaching, and learning from, literary

testimony. For though the ordinary practices of the everyday literature classroom can be turned toward the practice of witness, the practice of teaching literary testimony, whether it explicitly or implicitly bears witness to trauma, is not an ordinary practice. Such literature is haunted, and seeks to pass on its haunting, and when we teach these texts, their ghosts come trailing after them and in to our classrooms.

Of crisis and conversion: Shoshana Felman's "Crisis and Education"

> Something happened, toward the conclusion of the class, which took me completely by surprise. The class itself broke out into a crisis. And it was this crisis which made this class unique in my experience, this crisis which determined me to write about it, and which contained, in fact, the germ — and the germination — of this book. (*Testimony*, 47)

The book that grew out of Shoshana Felman's pedagogical crisis is one of the fundamental texts of the field of literary and cultural criticism that has grown up around theories of trauma. Co-written with psychoanalyst Dori Laub, founder of Yale's video archive of Holocaust survivor testimony, it helped to join the study of a particular traumatic event with the effort to create (not without controversy) generally applicable *theories* of trauma — in Felman's case, a theory of testimony and witnessing. Although Felman and Laub write within a tradition of critical work about the Holocaust, *Testimony* is often cited by critics working outside of this tradition. Ten years after its initial publication, *Testimony* remains an important text for trauma studies in general, and for the study of literature and trauma in particular.

It is worth noting, then, that all this begins in the classroom. "Crisis and Education's" focus on the classroom and its inclusion of student testimony, is highly unusual both within *Testimony* and the body of Felman's work as a whole. In fact, little of "Crisis and Education" itself takes place in the classroom. Most of the essay is given over to Felman's readings of the material that made up her original class syllabus, readings grounded in psychoanalysis and the theories of Paul de Man. But it is clear, in this essay and throughout *Testimony*, that for Felman part of the excitement of writing the book is the ways in which her attempts to theorize testimony keep spilling over into praxis. Over and over again Felman argues for the ways in which reading testimony and writing about it are not mere "academic exercises" but (her emphatic italics throughout) "*actions*."

"Education and Crisis" has pedagogical designs on its reader. It is structured to lead us, as Felman led her class, through historical, clinical, psychoanalytic, and poetic forms of testimony as they appear in the work of Camus, Dostoevsky, Freud, Mallarmé, and Celan. Felman hopes that her class (and presumably, her reader) will not only learn about these particular cases, but draw larger conclusions about the nature of the forms this testimony takes, and about testimony itself. She begins the class with "two tentative pedagogical objectives" in mind:

> 1) to make the class feel, and progressively discover, how testimony is indeed *pervasive*, how it is implicated — sometimes unexpectedly — in almost every kind of writing; 2) to make the class feel, on the other hand, and — there again — progressively discover, how the testimony cannot be subsumed by its familiar notion, how the texts that testify do not simply *report facts* but make us encounter — *strangeness*... (7)

Felman does not seek to bring the survivor of trauma in from beyond the pale — to have her students master testimony's dissonance, and "know the facts." Indeed, for Felman, "testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of memory that have been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition..." (5). Instead, she wishes for her students to "feel" and "progressively discover" how in spite of testimony's "pervasiveness" it can "make us encounter — *strangeness.*" The action comes from testimony to us. For Felman, testimony is a speech act. Like a promise, or a vow, it has the capability to act upon us, to bind us into a contract, and, as is finally Felman's argument, to "bring us into crisis."

Early in Felman's essay (and in the introduction to *Testimony* from which I have just quoted) the task of pedagogy seems to be the work of bringing students, through testimony, not closer to the survivors of trauma, nor even to their experience, but to the "crisis of witnessing" that trauma precipitates. Thus, she concludes her "story of a class" by arguing that in order for teaching to be meaningful it must occur "through a crisis," for this crisis transforms teaching into testimony itself, which in turn allows it to "make something *happen*, and not just transmit a passive knowledge..." In this, teaching becomes parallel to psychoanalysis because both are, Felman argues, "like testimony itself, *performative,* and not just *cognitive* insofar as they both strive to produce, and to enable *change*" (54-55).

The crisis that impels Felman to this conclusion occurs when her class watches the videotaped testimonies of two Holocaust survivors, videos Felman has chosen from

the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale, an archive co-founded by her co-author, Dori Laub. Felman describes the videos as wholly different from the previous forms of testimony she has introduced to the class. They are "not...literary but...rather of the order of raw documents — historical and autobiographical." They are also at the top of a hierarchy toward which the other forms of testimony have been leading, preparing her students, Felman argues, for an "encounter with the real." Felman hopes that "this added dimension of *the real*" as opposed to the clinical, psychoanalytic, or poetic, will "have an impact that would somehow be illuminating" (42).

What happens, as she describes the events that follow, is that her class becomes obsessed — unable to articulate a response, and yet unable to stop talking. Felman gets "phone calls from students at my home at all odd hours, in a manifest wish to talk about the session, although they did not quite know what to say" (48). She learns from colleagues that her students refuse to talk about anything besides the video testimony in their other classes, and from friends of the students and the students themselves, that they have pressed friends and roommates into service as well. As one student puts it, "At times, I felt that I would simply have to abduct someone and lock them up in my room and tell him about the *'whole'* thing" (49). At the same time, the students report feeling lost, fragmented, lonely and disoriented. The mastery of this "unusually bright, articulate group" of students is lost along with, one student tells Felman, "the whole class."

Felman "intervenes in the crisis" and "brings the class back into significance" by presenting them with a set of analogies between their own behavior and those of the survivors they have been studying. She suggests that the class has gone past merely

studying trauma to passing through its own trauma and invites them to testify to this crisis in their final papers for the class (49-52). The students accept her narrative and produce essays, two of which she quotes from with proud approval. Neither of these quotes are about the Holocaust, or a theory of testimony. Instead, they are about the students themselves (its their testimony, after all) and where the class intersects with their personal lives (55-56).

This neat conclusion conflicts rather sharply with Felman's theories — the strangeness that testimony enacts upon us, testimony's fragmented, inassimilable quality. Equally striking is the way Felman's subtle analysis of the constructed narrative testimony she finds in a wide range of genres gives way before the final genre she examines — a videotape. For, though the videotaped testimony may be an extremely powerful document, it is hardly "raw" and unmediated. The survivor's initial testimony, already shaped by the language and narrative frameworks available to the individual, is further shaped by the "professional listeners," the trained psychoanalysts and therapists who, Felman has told us, solicit this testimony, and help to bring it into being. And of course, the technology of video is itself a powerful mediation, not merely because it presents us with a screen instead a human being, but because it produces a powerful illusion of *completion* — a beginning, a middle, and an end.

I find it difficult to believe that Felman doesn't recognize these mediations (such an analysis would hardly be beyond a first year undergraduate in an Intro to Media Studies class). This means that she has deliberately chosen to ignore them, and to emphasize, instead, the ways in which the survivor testimony goes, somehow, beyond the

previous texts the students have encountered. Her emphasis is, in fact, demanded by the shape of her own narrative — the story of a class in crisis — and by the essay's efforts to reproduce in the reader the series of encounters to which Felman testifies. We must believe in the raw power of the videotape to communicate in an unmediated way in order to understand, first, the reaction of the students, and second, the need for Felman to intervene in that crisis, to bring it to an end.

But for that we must come to Felman's story with the same kind of loss of mastery — of, indeed, "the whole class'' — that her students themselves experience. Felman's essay builds case after case for testimony as fueled by shock, crisis, and loss, in preparation for this final, most complete "crisis of witnessing" (itself only a faint echo of the crisis of witnessing that Felman addresses throughout *Testimony*, the Holocaust). But her students, and by implication her readers, are not learning how to encounter crisis (or trauma). This is by definition impossible. They and we are learning how to read for the traces of this crisis (or trauma), a crisis in which we cannot intervene, but to which we can continue, through these narratives, to bear witness.

The narrative structure of crisis and intervention is not the dominant narrative structure of learning. As anyone who has been a student or a teacher knows, most of the time learning is a multiple, repetitive narrative, sometimes stultifyingly so, of many temporary moments of loss and mastery, of remembering and forgetting. Felman's story is, instead, a singular march forward ending in sudden, violent loss and mystic enlightenment. It is, in other words, a conversion narrative, with the students, humbled, lost, and speechless in the face of their "connection to the real," brought gently back into

the collective community of the class by Felman, in her role of teacher/psychoanalyst/ preacher, and invited, of course, to testify to the ways in which they have seen the light.

Kali Tal is not converted. Indeed the degree to which this light begins and ends with Felman herself is the source of Tal's angry critique of Felman's essay. Tal accuses Felman of both appropriating survivor testimony and usurping the position of the witness. The trouble lies, Tal argues, in the series of sloppy analogies Felman makes between teaching and psychoanalysis and testifying and psychoanalysis, a sloppiness Tal sees as driven by arrogance.

Tal is deeply invested in the idea that "bearing witness is an aggressive act" carried out by survivors of trauma for whom the decision to testify and remember is an active choice made in spite of "outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression."[9] These are not the ghost-ridden survivors that have populated my previous chapters. They are not compelled by an experience to which they finally have, by trauma's definition, no access. Instead their resistance is wholly outward, and political, an "outside pressure to revise or to repress." Tal therefore finds Felman's (and Laub's) construction of witnessing as a dialogue, specifically a psychoanalytic dialogue in which the survivor requires a listener or reader in order to be heard, patently offensive: "the worst sort of psychoanalytic pomposity."[10]

And for Tal, it is Felman's pedagogical crisis, the heart of her essay, that really gives her away: "The appropriative nature of Felman's project becomes most evident in

her discussion of the progress of the class on testimonial literature that she taught at Yale…" particularly in the "address to her students in which she compare[s] the dysfunction in the classroom to the rupture of language suffered by Holocaust survivors." After giving further examples from Felman's chapters on Paul de Man and Claude Lanzmann, Tal argues that "For Felman, every 'good' representation of the Holocaust is a vehicle for evoking the Holocaust 'experience'… Felman, as is her habit, makes no distinction between real and metaphorical crossings. And that, in the end, is the danger of her work…"[11]

Instructively, Tal finds Felman's attachment to the power of metaphor, her deliberate attempt, as Tal puts it, to not only provide historical context for her texts, but to "textualize history," as reprehensible as her bid for mastery. "As we shall see," Tal concludes, "the appropriation of survivor experience and its reduction to metaphor is a crucial component of the process of depoliticizing the survivor and then medicalizing her condition."[12] Tal can hardly, then, call for Felman to engage in more careful reading. Instead, Tal calls for her readers to reject "postmodern approaches" to testimony that push aside authorial intent and focus and see access to the text primarily as a "problem of reading" and to replace this analysis with a focus "on the act of *writing*" — the historical conditions under which the text is produced. Accordingly, Tal's definition of the literature of trauma is much stricter and narrower than Felman's (who finds testimony everywhere), comprising only "literature written by survivors of trauma" that "holds at its center the reconstruction and recuperation of the traumatic experience."[13]

Leaving aside for a moment the numerous problems that this narrow definition raises (Who decides who counts as a survivor? How do we decide what counts as a "reconstruction"? If survivors write about their experience in an oblique way, say, through fiction, does it no longer count as testimony?), Tal's insistence on the differences between metaphor and reality is a useful corrective to Felman's conversion narrative. One can imagine the pedagogical correlative of this corrective — an insistence that Felman's students turn from an examination of their own experience, and back to an examination of the radical difference between themselves and those who testified. In Tal's classroom, there would be no mistaking a video for "the real," and no need for crisis and conversion.

But in its effort to honor the "aggressive act" of bearing witness, the truths actively repressed by mainstream discourse, Tal's approach sacrifices much of the complexity of the texts produced by those witnesses and leaves little or no room for honoring the complexity of students' emotional reactions to those texts. Without a focus on "the problem of reading," and with a transparent authorial intention, the sole role that remains to the critic and teacher is an analysis of the discourses that surround the production of the text. Without Felman's "psychoanalytic dialogue," how can we understand our own compulsion to hear these terrible stories, and our reactions to them?

Megan Boler's *Feeling Power* would seem to offer one answer. Boler examines the nexus of emotions and education as a site of both social control and social resistance. Her project is, like Felman's and Tal's, an interdisciplinary one (Boler did the work for her book as a graduate student in UC Santa Cruz's History of Consciousness program).

Boler's analysis is grounded in Foucaultian practices of genealogy and archaelogy, and a Marxist analysis, via Raymond Williams, of "structures of feeling." The centerpiece of her book is a long chapter on the emergence of emotional literacy curricula, "Taming the Labile Student" in which she cautiously celebrates the acknowledgement of emotions in education, and sharply critiques their "management" and the links between the rhetoric of "emotional intelligence" and the eugenics agenda of the earlier "mental hygiene" movement.

Like Tal, Boler is reluctant to engage with psychoanalysis. Her emphasis on genealogical analysis makes her suspicious of what she calls the "curiously empty" categories of the unconscious and desire, categories to which, she finds, analysts most often resort when they approach the "sticky territory" of emotions. In place of the unconscious, Boler offers her readers a theory of "habits of inscribed inattention," more readily congruent with her call to produce a "genealogy of the emotions." It is somewhat surprising, then, to find that Boler's efforts to outline a pedagogical practice in line with her theories lead her straight to Felman and an emphasis on the necessity of crisis. She argues, through Felman, that in our current historical moment we are facing a "crisis of truth," and that testimony, "trauma's genre," answers this crisis by "exceeding the facts" by, as I have addressed above, refusing the reader's desire for closure, for a singular narrative that addresses "the truth about what happened."

Boler calls up Felman's formulations of testimony and witnessing in order to argue against what she calls "spectating" — a voyeuristic mode of reading — and "passive empathy," wherein the reader empathizes with "the very distant other" rather

than recognizing him or herself as "implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront." Instead, Boler calls for teachers to promote "testimonial reading," in which the reader "accepts responsibility as a co-producer of truth."[14] She promotes a "pedagogy of discomfort," in which the history that lays behind the emotions of anger and fear that so often emerge when students and teachers must question "cherished beliefs" may, in the context of a class, be *collectively* examined, rather than individually confronted through self-reflection that may devolve into narcissistic guilt.

Boler's pedagogical concerns resonate deeply with my own, and I am intrigued by the way the study of politics, education and emotions eventually led her to trauma. I too see the teacher's role as promoting students' abilities to read as witnesses. I find especially valuable Boler's call to trace the genealogy of the emotions that inevitably arise when trauma makes its presence felt in our classrooms. Her formulation of the reader's role in creating testimony as a "co-producer of truth" — so different from Tal's suspicions of appropriation — is congruent with my understanding of the reader's ability to accept or reject literary testimony's invitation to read against standardized trauma stories.

But I remain troubled by how what Boler seems to simply ignore about Felman's claims undermines her own. For example, Boler introduces her call for testimonial reading by recounting her experiences with student's passive empathetic reactions to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. But in spite of repeated calls for historicizing both the texts we teach and our emotional reactions to them, Boler fails to address why Felman's theories,

which are written to specifically address the "crisis of witnessing" produced by World War II and the Holocaust, might more easily address Boler's concerns about *Maus* than literary testimony engaged in other, longer histories of oppression and trauma. (In fact, she never engages with Felman's historical specificity at all.) Additionally, by engaging with psychoanalysis through Felman only tacitly, Boler both undermines her own rejection of the unconscious and, more importantly, as I will address in my comments on transference below, cuts off her access to important aspects of trauma that have currently been best observed and recounted by clinicians.

Most importantly, Boler's uncritical endorsement of Felman's emphasis on crisis (and the odd absence of any analysis of Felman's own pedagogical story) works against the promise of Boler's call for a genealogy of feeling. This call presumes, as I do, that there *is* a history to unearth in students' emotional responses to literary testimony, and that their disorientation consists, not (or not simply) in the shock of the new, the crisis of what we cannot know, so much as an encounter with the very old, the "habits" to which Boler calls our attention.

Boler's lack of critical engagement is important because, ultimately, in spite of Felman's repeated analogies between teaching and psychoanalysis, Felman's description of what she hopes for from her students sounds less like analysis, in which the therapist helps the patient to see for the first time what she or he has always known, and much more like cognitive dissonance, in which the shock of an encounter with new information, like a traumatic encounter, throws the subjects view of the world and self into doubt:

> In the age of testimony, and in view of contemporary history I want my students to be able to receive information that is *dissonant*, and not just *congruent*, with everything that they have learned beforehand. Testimonial teaching fosters the capacity to witness something that may be surprising, cognitively dissonant. The surprise implies the crisis. (53-4)

I am sympathetic to Felman's description of what a class fully cathecting with traumatic testimony looks like. I agree that when attempting to take up the invitation to bear witness to testimony we must, ultimately, speak before we fully know what it is that we will say, without ever fully having comprehended.

But just as Felman's commitment to crisis as the sole mode of trauma leads her away from the careful commitment to non-closure and towards her dramatic claims for a practically instantaneous transformation, here her commitment to surprise, to the shock of the new, leads her away from the possibility that what her class is encountering is, simultaneously, very old information that they, and the daily world they live in, work hard to forget. The shock lies not solely in the new information, the specific story, but in the way this story asks them to confront what they have always known and depended upon. Like a patient in psychotherapy seeing for the first time what has been there all along or like — well, like *students* — who discover their most recent epiphany was some fragment of a thought they wrote down in a notebook years ago and forgot about, until they learned enough to remember it.

To take trauma's quotidian aspect (and history's permanent emergency) seriously in the classroom is to realize that one "crisis," no matter how memorable, will never be enough. Sometimes, it may be merely a distraction from what we knew all along.

The teacher's anger: bearing witness in the classroom

I can't kill and I can't teach everyone.
Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*

I have not offered these rapid-fire series of comparisons between the psychotherapeutic process and the experience of teaching as a completed theory or practical guide, but as an outline of the kind of field in which such theories and advice might be able to grow. The complexity suggested by transference and counter-transference and the presence, always there, of trauma stories that remain untold, means that any generalizations are, at best, a rough and imperfect framework for beginning to recognize, with much greater but still incomplete subtlety, our own experiences in the classroom and those of our students.

Just as I have repeatedly turned to close readings of literary texts throughout this project in order to get at the complexity of trauma's effects, I want to turn here to several close readings of pedagogical encounters with trauma. I begin by returning to the theme of pedagogy as it runs throughout Williams' *Alchemy of Race and Rights* in order to illustrate the particular dilemma of the teacher for whom subject and subjectivity, teaching and testimony are irrevocably linked. Next, I turn to a pedagogical encounter recorded in Eve Sedgwick's essay "Queer and Now," in which the vehemence of a student/teacher clash over Sedgwick's publicly stated intention to create a lesbian and gay literature course with a queer audience in mind makes sense only as an effect of trauma and the effort to bear witness. Finally, I tell a story from my own classroom of student resistance and transference in an introductory American literature course, in order

to illustrate the way that trauma can make itself felt even when there are no direct representations of catastrophe and the testimony is only implicit. Indeed, none of these encounters might, on first reading, warrant association with "trauma" as it is traditionally understood. Instead, these stories illustrate the effects, in the classroom, of the kind of long-standing, quotidian trauma that I have tried to describe throughout this project.

What is left of pedagogical encounters with trauma in the absence of a clear crisis, as I have suggested in my notes on traumatic transference, are stories of emotional excess, or misplaced emotion, the signs of transference, fantasy, or more generally (and less psychoanalytically) the evidence of the things not seen. Recognizing the presence of trauma in the classroom allows us to acknowledge the high stakes, the risk and depth, of political, intellectual, and emotional work performed by teachers and students who engage with literary testimony and take up the invitation to bear witness. Once we recognize teachers of literary testimony as deeply involved in cultural trauma work, none of the difficulties they encounter seem surprising or exaggerated. Melodrama, paranoia, hysteria, intimidation, the whole range of pathological emotionalism of which women, especially, are often hysterically accused by their supposedly more rational, reasonable colleagues may now be understood as the "appropriate" emotional register of a teacher in a classroom where worlds and souls are on the line.

It is the flaring presence of a teacher's anger in response to a surprising clash with students that links together the three pedagogical moments I have chosen. Boler names anger and fear as the primary emotions that arise in response to traumatic testimony's disruption. But though she admits that teachers, too, must expect to

encounter anger and fear, the sole focus of her analysis and recommendations is student emotion. Like therapists, teachers are often expected to conceal their emotional investments in the texts they teach, if not in the name of objectivity, then at least in the interest of clearing the way for students to form their own judgments and reactions. In a classroom informed by a concern with social justice, feminism, and the concomitant concerns of sharing power with students rather than wielding it over them, anger is perhaps the most taboo of emotions. Unlike sorrow, fear, or joy all of which are associated with openness and vulnerability, anger is culturally associated with power, danger, and violence. Though all moments of emotional intensity can be manipulated to increase the power of those who wield it over those who do not, anger is the most obvious, the clearest threat. It is relatively unproblematic only when wielded as a tool by the oppressed to name and overcome injustice. That is, when it is wielded by those who do not pose an obvious threat. What happens then, when the teacher, clearly in a position of power in regard to the student, is also identified, whether as witness or survivor, with the position of the oppressed? Is the teacher's anger ever justified? Or, considered from a slightly different angle, can the teacher aligned with the disruptive material of traumatic testimony ever *avoid* being seen as angry?

These questions are especially pertinent for teachers like Patricia Williams, who, as I began to examine in the previous chapter, bear witness in the classroom to histories of trauma and oppression to which they are subject themselves. As Barbara Johnson notes of Williams, such teachers become walking allegories in and out of the classroom, forever preceded and surrounded by an atmosphere that bristles with expectations and

projections. For some teachers, the classroom may appear to be a space that is relatively controlled. No matter how difficult things get the bell will ring, the semester will end, the teacher will pass out the grades. But teachers for whom subject and subjectivity are deeply contiguous, teachers who have been hired, in some cases, to represent the institutions engagement with, or simply to be, as Du Bois puts it "the problem," the classroom is every room. Analyzing, writing about and teaching others to see the daily effects of historical trauma can be one way of making these effects tolerable, intellectually and spiritually fruitful, even profitable. But as a survival strategy, its limits are the limits of the teacher's energy.[15]

Throughout *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* Williams portrays herself as caught in untenable pedagogical encounters both in and out of the classroom. As I discussed in the previous chapter, her authority and power as a teacher serve only to increase the heat and light of the spotlight under which she already functions as a black, female professional. In the classroom, she grasps for the words and narratives that will convey her point to students who would rather be shopping. For every student who comes to her for help, two or three go "above her head" to complain about her to the law dean. Walking across campus, she is ambushed by students who pop out from behind pillars in the dark to ask her about her funeral. Outside the classroom she posts signs on the street, gives lectures to fellow professors, lessons to her friends and family, to herself, and finally, in the dead of the night, to polar bears.[16]

I want to return to Williams' encounter with B., which I have already analyzed for the complex ways in which it signals trauma's interruption of daily life, to focus on the

way it also captures the dilemma of the teacher's anger — even, or perhaps especially, justified anger. Ambushed while working in the library, Williams is caught off her guard, unable to muster up the necessary teacherly *sang-froid* in response to her student's "'argument' that 'the rich can't help who they are.'"

> I am very angry and it shows. I can feel how unprofessorial I must seem; looking into her eyes, I know I'll have to pay.
>
> A few days later I receive a memo from the associate dean, expressing his concern about the way in which certain inappropriate "trumping moves" are being employed to "silence the more moderate members of the student body."[17]

Williams' anger is read (by both the student and the dean) as power, a "trumping move" to which the student is powerless to respond. But, in fact, a professor who is very angry at a student quickly loses much of the status that she or he is seen as abusing if the student is able to find a sympathetic party for her story. As Williams points out, she seems "unprofessorial," perhaps is not really a professor at all. The logic of racism and sexism have made Williams' professorial-ness doubtable from the start, and her anger suspected/expected. Her rebuke from the dean, in the course of her story, comes swiftly. The student clearly found a ready and willing ear for her complaint.

When a student can control her teacher through her alignment with mainstream discourse and authorities sympathetic to her "more moderate" politics, the lines of power begin to blur. As Williams tells the story, the dean reads the confrontation as a traditional right-wing-versus-left-wing debate. Williams, the radical teacher, is tamping down the "more moderate" opinions of her student. But this reading of the situation makes the angry confrontation between Williams and her student into a simple breakdown in rational discourse about what would otherwise have been well-reasoned opinions, each given equal time, about the viability of social change and the distribution of wealth.

In fact, the confrontation *is* due to a breakdown, but not in mythic rational discourse. What has broken down, before the student ever approached Williams, are standard social agreements over trauma's containment. As I have outlined this kind of containment in the realms of law, national politics, and literature, the rules for breaking

the taboo on speaking of trauma without disrupting the current balance of power go something like this: When can the unspeakable be safely spoken? When we know what is going to be said, and how, and what our reaction is supposed to be. The "excess" of emotional response is both an effect and a sign of this social disruption. When Williams' student first interrupts Williams in the library her complaint is that Williams' class is "out of control." That is, it has erupted into her private life. It's haunting her, she can't get away from it, so she, in turn, goes out to haunt her professor. Williams, for her own part, "resents" the student's interruption. She can't get away from her class either.

The academy's deep ambivalence over the place of something it often calls "ideological controversy" or simply "politics" in the classroom, and what I would call the presence of trauma stories and their effects, has much to do with this failure of containment, and with a mourning for the loss of the "gentleman's disagreement" and all the phrase implies in terms of race, class, and gender. Tips for how to successfully "manage" such "controversies" in the classroom are mostly about how to re-establish containment. UT's own Center for Teaching Effectiveness, for example, in a set of recommendations specifically designed to protect the class evaluation scores of teachers who insist on engaging in such controversy, suggests that teachers warn the students ahead of time that the material will be emotionally difficult or "controversial," that they set up rules with the students for how to express emotional reactions or end arguments that can't be resolved otherwise, and that they set up the syllabus and assignments so that expectations about grades are clear at every step of the way.[18]

There is, in fact, much of value in this kind of containment. Students and teachers — people — cannot learn through continual crisis and conflict. They must have time to think and respond. As I discussed in my reading of Felman's essay, crisis in the classroom may in fact convince students that they know far more than they do. Indeed, in spite of her laudatory attitude towards crisis, Felman deliberately avoids repeating the

experience of her catalyzing class: "I have now repeated this course several times, but never with the same series of texts, never again in the same way and with the same framework of evidence. It was in the fall of 1984"(7). By the time *Testimony* is published, Felman's anecdote is eight years old. But the question remains, as always, *for whom* the effects of trauma and its testimony are successfully contained. For students or teachers who live under structures of oppression that force them to continually remember historical trauma and its continued presence, containment begins to look far more like censorship.

Indeed, one of the meaner twists of the angry teacher's dilemma is that constantly keeping a guard on one's tongue because one's marginalized presence makes guilty others expect one to be angry means one is almost certain to be angry — very angry. And this kind of anger can be paralyzing, can render one, finally, powerless. As Williams so eloquently puts it, in the passage from which I drew the epigraph for this section:

> I am enraged by the possibility of this subsurface drama-waiting-to-happen. My rage feels dangerous, full of physical violence, like something that will get me arrested. And also at the same time I am embarrassed by all these feelings, ashamed to reveal in them the truth of my insignificance. All this impermissible danger floats around in me, boiling, exhausting. I can't kill and I can't teach everyone. I can't pretend it doesn't bother me; it eats me alive. So I protect myself. I don't venture into the market very often. I don't deal with other people if I can help it. I don't risk exposing myself to the rage that will get me arrested.[19]

This passage is as performative as the rest of *Alchemy*: Williams is deliberately inhabiting the allegory that others have made of her in order to detail its hazards. Nevertheless, Williams' position, and her isolation in that position, dramatized throughout *Alchemy*, are hardly unique. Neither, one would have to believe, is the emotional state she records.

Even as that isolation is eased — as more people of color, openly gay, lesbian and transgendered people, more working class people, and others who have previously been all but shut out of the academy begin to enter the profession, and more scholars in general take up the previously marginalized subjects of ethnic literatures, race, sexuality, gender and class —teaching as a witness is likely to remain difficult.

Indeed, as many others have remarked, the "mainstreaming" of previously marginalized literature does not necessarily result in the fulfillment of its radical potential.

Eve Sedgwick details one such telling moment in her essay "Queer and Now." Sedgwick begins with the compelling claim that "everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of [queer] adolescents." Their work, and her own, bears witness. A few pages later she angrily defines and rebuts the outrage of her straight students, who are "incensed" by an interview, published in Amherst's student newspaper, in which Sedgwick stated she originally designed the course for lesbian and gay students:

> Their sense of entitlement as straight-defined students was so strong that they considered it an inalienable right to have all kinds of different lives, histories, cultures unfolded as if anthropologically in formats specifically designed — designed from the ground up — for maximum legibility to themselves: they felt they shouldn't so much as have to slow down the Mercedes to read the historical markers on the battlefield.[20]

In an essay that otherwise delicately and generously extends itself to de-familiarize the norm and to argue for the availability and importance of the queer, that Mercedes feels like a very expensive tank. Indeed, Sedgwick begins to relent by the end of the next sentence, relocating her student's obtuseness in the academic system and the difficulty of teaching: "That it was a field where the actual survival of other people in the class might at the very moment be at stake — where, indeed, in a variety of ways so might their own be — was hard to make notable to them among the permitted assumptions of their liberal arts education."[21] But nevertheless, her students' assumptions try Sedgwick's ingenuity, and her patience.

Like Williams, Sedgwick finds herself called to account by students who feel she is abusing her power. Also like Williams, Sedgwick is taken by surprise. She states she had no idea her comments in the college paper would be an occasion for outrage. The brief, but notable shift in tone in the essay seems like a trace of an original unguarded response, like the un-mastered Williams' quick response to her student.

But where Williams' student is haunted by the sense that she might be powerful, and therefore responsible, Sedgwick's students are disturbed by an unfamiliar sense of marginalization. Part of Sedgwick's outrage stems from her students' inability to recognize the connection between this marginalization and privilege—not "just" the privilege of social and legal acceptance, but of safety, of *life*. Queer adolescents who survive, Sedgwick notes, "survive into risk," forever a potential target of another's rage or their own alienation. Famously, Sedgwick has borne witness so long and so well for the queer community that, though nominally heterosexual, she is almost wholly identified with/as queer. Her students amplify this, asking her to behave as a native informant, to produce queerness as a commodity, a cool consumer good, an "elective," a fun class. This is not to say that a class in queer literature *won't* (or shouldn't) be fun, or at least funny. As I noted in my reading of Alexie, laughter is a necessary result of a permanent engagement with traumatic history. Rather, my point is that were Sedgwick to allow them what they wanted, a class designed "from the ground up" to their specifications, they would remain far more alienated from the course's subject than they would if they were to enter the class aware, as every witness is, of the unbridgeable distance between themselves and those who testify.

The clash between Sedgwick and her students is also a testament to the difference between teaching a class filled with literary testimony to quotidian trauma (or like Williams, founded on a traumatic contract) and teaching a class about a subject or an event (like the Holocaust) that is recognized from the outset as obviously and importantly traumatic. As Sedgwick herself notes, the students' anger need not be read as simple spoiled petulance, but as an indictment of liberalism and its superficial embrace of "multiculturalism" and "diversity" as another kind of consumer choice, or, as a panel at a conference on pedagogy and ethnic literature I attended put it, a "trophy wife" to be acquired, presumably, as a beautiful ornament to prove one has really arrived.[22]

Explicitly recognizing the ways in which the containment and exclusion of many newly included categories of literature is bound up in the containment of trauma and the exclusion of its testimony is a necessary step in understanding how to fight for and renew the urgency of teaching literatures of oppression in a such a context. To *make notable* that *the actual survival of other people* (including ourselves) *at that very moment might be at stake*, we must borrow from the strategies offered by the authors

in this project: to keep on disrupting the standard narratives of our field, lest they freeze into tragedy; to embrace hybridization, interdisciplinarity, even bastardization, lest our concern with authenticity and purity turn us against each other; to recognize the underlying traumatic contracts that link our subjects to one another; and to stubbornly, if humorously, insist on the centrality of our reservations/ghettos/prisons/margins/classrooms.

Only by doing the latter, for example, can we continue to make good on the promise of Toni Morrison's 1988 call, in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," to re-see the American Literature canon itself, rather than to merely add more authors to its list. To do so, she makes clear, requires an engagement with the unspeakable and with ghosts. Not only with what she calls the "ghost in the machine" of 19th-century canonical American literature — slavery — but with the violence we have done to our favored authors in order to suppress their engagement with these ghosts. To pay this kind of attention to American literature, she understands, is far more dangerous than suggesting that such authors are simply passé.[23]

Morrison's essay is at the center of my own pedagogical tale. The class, comprised of 23 white students, two Mexican-American students, and a lone Trinidadian woman, was an American literature and methodologies course meant to prepare prospective English majors for upper division courses. It had a partially preset syllabus that included Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Zora Neale Hurston, and Tony Kushner. To help tie these disparate texts together, I assigned Morrison's essay, hoping it would help us think about what, exactly, "American Literature" was and serve as a good introduction to our first text, Melville's "Benito Cereno." The students' assignment was to write a précis of Morrison's argument followed by a one-paragraph response to a part of her argument that they felt was particularly relevant to the class.

Though the students seemed to be an exceptionally bright, articulate group, I had expected they might have trouble with the assignment. Most of my students find it very difficult to summarize an argument rather than give their opinion about it, and many, well-trained by UT's preponderance of large lecture courses, read by skimming quickly and filling in the gaps with what they think the author *should* be saying. What I did not

anticipate was the way that racism, whether conscious or not, would transform Morrison's call to liberate Melville and others from the constraints of the canon into a diatribe against the canon. "This author," many proclaimed, channeling one dominant popular conservative critique of African American studies, "wants to get rid of white authors and replace them with black ones." One student went further and personalized the assumption: "While this author obviously has talent," she wrote, "she feels that she is not getting enough attention."

After reading nearly 20 such efforts, I decided to return the papers to the students with comments rather than grades.[24] I was startled and angry and felt some kind of official response was needed. I remember the structure I chose for my comments very clearly, and some of what I said to my class verbatim. (Though of course this is suspicious, given the human tendency to revise the past so that it flatters the one who remembers.) For the purposes of contrasting it with what I think the students actually heard me say, I ask your indulgence as I quote myself at length. It went something like this:

> After reading your précis-responses it is clear to me that most of you did not have a clear grasp of the assignment, so I am not going to assign grades to these papers. Instead, I'm going to ask most of you to reread Morrison and do the assignment again. I'll show you some good examples today, and we'll talk about some things to avoid. The main problem with your papers was that you rushed through the summary of Morrison's arguments, and then, based on an incomplete or simply incorrect reading of Morrison, many of you sharply criticized her for things that she had not said at all, or that had little to do with her arguments, or that had more to do with what you didn't know than the essay itself (for example, one of you suggested that the essay was really about her need for more attention as a writer, though at the time she wrote the essay she was already highly celebrated). I want you to know that you never have to blindly accept anything I say to you, or assign to you in this class. However, you are students — you are here to learn what you don't know — and that means a little bit of humility is in

> order when you approach a new subject. You need to make sure you know what you're talking about before you go out on a limb and dismiss the author you are reading.
>
> I realize responding to literary criticism is a new skill for most of you, and that most of you just need more practice. That's why I'm going to have you rewrite. However, I think there is another reason why many of you were not able to complete the assignment. Morrison writes in her essay that "race is a swift, and swiftly obeyed call to arms," and I think something like an answer to that call to arms happened in our class papers. For example, many of you accused Morrison of wanting to banish white writers from the college curriculum. Others stated that she felt African, or African American writers were superior to European writers. In fact, Morrison states explicitly that she's not going to give up canonical writers. Even if you missed this line, you should have noticed that she spends all of section II, a third of the essay, discussing the wonders of Melville's *Moby Dick*! Today, I want to talk about some of the other ideas Morrison brings up in relation to how writers like Melville have been read, and why you may not have noticed Morrison's emphasis on reclaiming canonical writers.

Not too bad, I still think, though I can hardly blame my students for picking up on my anger given that paradoxical (and this, embarrassingly, I really do remember verbatim) permission to reject what I say followed immediately by a demand for humility. Indeed, I suspect that, for the same reasons that they misread Morrison's essay, what my students actually heard me say went something like this:

> You are in big trouble. These papers are terrible, and you have to do them over again because you are all such bad readers and writers. You disrespected one of my favorite writers and I'm really mad about it. In fact, I think you're all a bunch of stupid racists.

My suspicions are based partly on the fact that, in the first of my regularly scheduled individual conferences, a few days after I had returned the papers, I received a visit from not merely an individual student, but a delegate from the class.

"I've been learning at work," she said bravely, and with great dignity, "that when someone's doing something wrong you have to tell them so they can fix it."

"Yes—" I responded, encouraging her, though not without trepidation.

"Well—" she hesitated. "I — well — some of us. Well, a lot of us. We think you just don't *like* us. Aside from the comments on the papers I mean."

This is hardly a crisis of the exalted and dramatic sort that Felman describes. Neither is it the kind of clash that Williams regularly endured. The student came to me directly, instead of complaining about me to a supervisor. And, like all of the students in these stories, my students still *cared* whether or not I liked them — they wanted to engage with, not dismiss me. (This may have had something to do with the fact that I was white and female, or with my personal style, or with the pedagogical strategy of mandatory individual conferences. Or I may have just been lucky to have a student in the process of being trained in good corporate management.)

Nevertheless, underlying these humorous and fairly banal exchanges is a circuit of trauma and transference: My students, still learning how to read and articulate ideas that differ from the repetitious drone of dominant discourse, project onto Morrison what is for them a most threatening aspect of racial politics: the white fear of elimination and replacement by the Others upon whom they depend for their identity. I, the white teacher, read their papers and feel the pressure of the ghosts Morrison has conjured — not merely a matter of poor reading, but a matter of forgetting the dead I still struggle to remember and to bear witness to in the classroom. My students, most of them anyway, use my anger to turn away from Morrison. They can't imagine that's what I'm *really* angry about.[25]

My first impulse, to ask them to return to the text, was one that would serve me well throughout the semester. It is, in some ways, the only possible response in all three of these anecdotes. Sedgwick writes that, over the years, the most controversial thing about her gay and lesbian literature class was that it was a *literature* course — why, her students wanted to know, did they have to take this circuitous route to real life? Williams' students constantly complain that what she is teaching them is not "real law," but "just stories." Literary testimony always takes us away from what we assume is real, and toward something that seems unreal, uncanny, unbelievable — even unspeakable.

And the repetitive act of critical reading and rereading, in which we are constantly surprised, upon returning to the text, by what we have not seen (or by what we see differently), in which, again and again, we forget and remember, is at the heart of learning to read as a witness. It's not just that students learn that they don't know everything — they're already constantly worried about mastering knowledge that appears to be mysteriously withheld from them. It's the process by which they learn that what they thought they didn't, or couldn't, know was easily in their grasp all along — not *in between the lines*, but, like Morrison's long tribute to Melville, or Poe's purloined letter, already in plain sight.

I admitted my anger to my students (it had been, after all, in plain sight), and reassured them I would not punish them for what they needed to learn. They responded by turning, with a passion, to the subjects and methods Morrison outlined in their reading of "Benito Cereno." The sense of high stakes, clear in our initial clash, informed the rest of the semester — engagement, exhilaration, fear, anger, and simple weariness cycled

through the class more than once. My students never asked why such intensity was necessary, nor what they would gain from such difficult engagement.[26] They were too caught up in the fact of the engagement itself. Some of the students never fully understood Morrison's argument. Many of them understood it very well. More than a few wrote about seeing/remembering the ghostly silences or absences around which their own lives and beliefs had been formed. Some were excited by this, others longed for their previous myopia. (As one student said, "I still like it best when everyone is the same."[27])

But learning mimics trauma (and so can loosen its grip) in another important way: Its effects are never obvious at the moment the learning takes place. Instead, they surface much later, called up unexpectedly by a shift in context, or intruding long after the student thinks s/he has forgotten everything s/he knows. Indeed, what was perhaps the most important sign of the class's success, and the one that explains most clearly the way that acknowledging implicit testimony can shift and open familiar texts, came almost a full semester after the class was over. As I was walking down the hallway, a fellow teacher called out in passing, "I have one of your former students, X. She's doing really well; she's a great reader." "X?" I queried, having trouble placing the name. "Yes," the professor replied, "she was in your African American Literature course."

The Evidence of Things Not Seen: Student Stories

Classrooms are often home to temporary communities whose emotional complexity and intensity and strange half-public, half-private intimacy makes them difficult to describe to outsiders — to those who weren't actually in the class, or even to

those who were, but were enmeshed in its relations in an entirely different way. (Any teacher who has received puzzlingly disparate comments on her or his teacher evaluations can attest to this last point.) This is the second time I have written about an emotionally charged class in my work, and it is also the second time that I have found myself falling into a seemingly inevitable narrative — also employed by Williams, Sedgwick, Felman, Boler, and others — wherein I, as teacher, am featured as the rueful, sometimes troubled, but ultimately wise heroine and the students make short, well-edited cameo appearances via their written comments (usually to show they have learned something) or appear en masse as my restive/enthusiastic/resistant/etc. audience.

In my story, as in Williams' and Sedgwick's, the students are sometimes denoted by a few basic identity markers: age, gender, race, class (though rarely all of these at the same time). But, ironically, in Boler's chapters on testimonial reading and a pedagogy of discomfort, both of which comment repeatedly on student reaction and non-reaction, these markers disappear almost completely. Moving into this vacuum, I can guess at the students' privileged class and racial status (since she repeatedly calls for the students to "acknowledge their implication" in "random social hierarchies" and "oppressive power relations"), but the students remain almost wholly faceless, trapped in a history-less limbo that seems to promote the exact opposite of the complex, ethical relationships Boler calls for, in part, by using the student's written responses.

As I read Boler's worried, indignant response to students who claimed to "know all about" the Holocaust and "what it was like to be a Jew in Germany," I thought, first, about how those who have not yet learned how to articulate their own thoughts in an academic setting often uncannily channel mainstream discourse in the meantime, even when it directly contradicts their own experience. I then thought of all the students I have had in my classes who present and write as privileged members of the mainstream, but

whose personal histories include sexual abuse, rape, assault, the recent death of intimate family members and friends, homelessness, and drug addiction, to name only those troubles that students have openly shared with me. I'm certain there were others, and that there were layers of trouble and trauma that I remained unaware of even in those cases where students let me know what was going on. And just as we need not be aware of the field of historical trauma in which they live to react to it, and act in concert with it, teachers and students need not have conscious knowledge of a trauma survivor's presence, or his or her investments, in order to form a constellation of reactions — protective, resentful, irritated, and so on — around these identifications. Indeed, the kind of traumatic histories I have mentioned so far are only the most obvious and explicit of examples.

What does — and doesn't — this background hum of half-disclosed trauma mean in the classroom? What it *doesn't* mean is that Boler, or any other teacher, is wrong to ask her or his students to reflect upon the ways in which they are implicated in oppressive power relations and social hierarchies. What it does mean is that we must do so with the full awareness that student resistance, as expressed by anger, guilt, too "easy" or "pleasurable" over-identification or even apathy, may be located in traumatic histories of which the students themselves may be only half aware. Survivors of trauma often have little chance to find their own stories in their full complexity reflected back to them from the outside world. Like others whose stories are marginalized, they learn to find them where they can, through complex cross-identification. Dorothy Allison, for example, recalls finding her story in the fiction and essays of James Baldwin. In "Queer and

Now," Sedgwick recalls her own ability to find meaning through "smuggling, stealing, overreading" — queer cross-identifications by which it becomes possible to find one's history in fantasied subtexts.

Rightly intent on rescuing the historical specificity of identities and oppression from humanism's easy universalism, I believe we have only begun to recognize the potential — as well as the problems — of traumatic cross-identification. For example, Boler cites with approval Minnie Bruce Pratt's re-examination of her exploitive identification with African American music. But what she does not address is the way Pratt's initial identification was linked to her queer desires, her traumatic break with her family, and her move out of her first home-community, and on to the kind of political life and self-examination that made it possible for her to write "Skin, Blood, Heart." I am not suggesting that teachers be held responsible for all of their student's stories. Their undisclosed testimony will remain forever unquantifiable. But in addition to remaining cognizant of the daily ways in which our teaching intersects with unknown trauma histories, we can begin to think about how these unspoken testimonies point to power relations between the students and the teacher, relations that include the unspoken testimony of teachers.

We might begin by asking, for example, why, when we write about pedagogy, we so rarely tell the stories of our own student experiences.[28] Tal and Boler wrote the bulk of their projects while they were, like myself, graduate students. In Boler's chapter on testimonial reading, the class she discusses is clearly one for which she is not the professor, but the graduate teaching assistant. (In fact her constraints were greater than

my own. In addition to a pre-assigned syllabus, she is not the lecturer for the class, and she is teaching only a fraction of the number of students in the class.) This dissertation had, among its catalysts, troubling experiences in specific graduate seminars that gave rise to my concerns over transference, anger, and ethical reading. Where are the stories of our experiences as students , of which we have nearly a quarter of a century along with our ten years or so of teaching?[29]

It is so easy to understand this omission that it is almost unfair to ask the question. Precisely because of their half student/half teacher status, graduate students exist in a pedagogical borderland where we both wield authority as teachers and remain more beholden than ever to the power of our professors, mentors, and advisors — all of whom, we hope, will one day become our colleagues in that surprisingly small world that is the academy. Both Boler's *Feeling Power*, and Tal's *World's of Hurt* bear ample evidence, in the form of blurbs, acknowledgments, and the names listed in their book series' advisory boards, of the ways in which our teachers' power continues long after the class is over.[30]

And yet. The evidence of these unheard stories persists and sometimes flares up and out in ways that range from full-out hostile debate to the kind of half-story that can be found, to offer only a single example, in the acknowledgements to Tal's book. "Robert Stepto's assistance was essential to my project," she writes, "in the cold environment of Yale University's graduate school and American Studies Program, he offered me warm shelter." She continues:

> My teachers John Blassingame, Deborah Thomas, and David DeRose provided me with advice and support during the difficult years I spent in the Ph.D. program

> at Yale and made it possible for me to complete my degree and retain both my sense of proportion and my self-respect — to laugh instead of cry when a Director of Graduate Studies remonstrated me for my "willfulness." I would also like to thank Herman Beavers, Jennifer Memhard, Wendy Kupperman, Barbara Ballard, David Luebke, Ramona Doute, and Linda Watts for their friendship, given generously (sometimes at great personal cost) in the wake of the divisive and bitter politics of the Yale clerical and technical worker's strike of 1984.[31]

1984, the year of Tal's "bitter and divisive struggle," is also the year in which Felman was bringing her Yale graduate students through their pedagogical crisis, during which "they could talk of nothing else, no matter where they were." (A class that she deliberately avoids trying to recreate.) Is the echo between the anger in the acknowledgments and Tal's sharp, very nearly personal critique of Felman's "psychoanalytic pomposity" a sign of an undisclosed story about erased testimony, or merely a sign of Tal's consistently striking style? These purely circumstantial clues may mean everything or nothing. My aim here is neither to indict Felman as a bad teacher nor Tal as a critic with a grudge but to point to the traces of a history that is both intimate (Tal's experience at Yale and her undisclosed relationship with Felman) and global (the coinciding crises of Felman's class as it faces the testimony of the Holocaust and World War II, and Yale's involvement in local and global labor markets), and that, though it will ultimately remain inaccessible, most certainly makes itself felt, as the subject turns and returns to how to teach trauma and testimony.

To this half-told testimony I must add my own. My encounters, as a student, with trauma in the classroom took the form of all the scenarios I have covered here: students with half-disclosed survivor stories clashing with teachers caught in the throes of both personal anger and institutional spasms of traumatic return to unresolved history; teachers

reluctant to engage with the traumatic content they require their students to encounter, leaving the students to drift in their own ethical morass; teachers all too eager to engage with both the explicit traumatic content of the texts they have assigned and the student histories these texts brought to light. There is value in these encounters. Like texts that refuse to resolve their narratives into any easy closure, they continue to haunt me, pushing me as hard (or harder) as any of my graduate training to trace the common, extraordinarily complex lines between the representation of trauma in literary testimony, its echo in haunted readers, and the presence, as always, of stories that remain untold.

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[1]Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony* (Routledge, New York:1992), 53. All further cites in the text from this edition.

[2]In the first chapter these crises included the declaration of a national crisis of violence against children which gave rise to the professionalization of social work and the political codification and usurpation of grassroots survivor testimony, and the corresponding belief in the crisis of violence against women that fueled WAP's actions at Barnard, and a radical split in the women's movement. In the second chapter, the implicit crisis of the disappearing Indian fuels the motivations and rationalizations of salvage anthropology, which, ironically, in turn, both deliberately and inadvertently, works to calcify the crisis into a myth used to justify federal policies of eradication. In the third chapter it is a perceived crisis in the body of the law, a body overwhelmed by a too messy, too-complex proliferation of examples, that sets up the ALA's efforts to control for the traumatic effects of the real world's incursion on the effectiveness of the law's praxis.

[3]Reading *Bastard Out of Carolina,* I have shown how Allison's complex gathering of competing narratives works to show us how "everyday life is everyday life even when you are being beaten and raped," and how the crisis-driven urge toward rescue and revenge too often further isolates its object. Reading Alexie, I have shown how comedy

and satire help Alexie escape nostalgia for a "lost past" invented by colonizers and anthropologists, and instead create a testimony to hybridity. Reading Williams, I have shown how her commitment to a law that accounts for trauma has led her away from the traditional style and narratives of legal analysis and toward the literary, and, in turn, toward an understanding of trauma as fundamental, rather than an exception to, the social contract underlying the commercial contracts she studies and writes about.

[4]My searches under "trauma and pedagogy" turned up work that was devoted to teaching those diagnosed, or diagnosable, with PTSD, most of whom were assumed to be foreign, i.e. refugees from various war-torn countries where human rights violations were well-known to have occurred. There were also a few articles about "vicarious" trauma that addressed the difficulties of teaching about trauma in, say, a counseling degree program. These lines of inquiry replicate the divisions I have attempted to bridge within my own discipline and will, as I note below, be fruitful ground for future work.

[5]Helen Brown, *When Race Breaks Out: Conversations About Race and Racism in College Classrooms (*Peter Lang, New York: 2001). The field is obviously much larger and more complex than I can address here, though I would like to enlarge this essay's scope at a future date. I am indebted to conversations with my colleagues in educational psychology, Paul LePhuoc, and Jill Rader for confirming the impressions of my initial survey, and to Drs. Lucia Gilbert and Davida Charney for giving me the keywords necessary to redirect my research. Rather than list my entire consulted biography, I'd like to offer two explicit examples of cognitive dissonance and developmental theory: McFalls, Elisabeth and Cobb-Roberts Deirdre, "Reducing Resistance to Diversity Through Cognitive Dissonance Instruction." *Journal of Teacher Eductation,* Vol 52, No. 2, March/April 2001 164-172; Tatum, Beverly, "Talking about Race, Learning about Racism: the Application of Racial Identity Development Theory in the Classroom." *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 62, No. 1, Spring 1992. The latter cites many student responses that would be interesting to read for trauma as I have outlined it here.

[6]The bias toward white student's reactions may reflect the racial and socioeconomic realities of most of the major research universities where the studies take place, but this is not a case where "majority rule" produces good results.

[7]There is also something to be said here about the use of "race" or "ideology" versus the explicit use of trauma as a framework for discussing pedagogy. Moving towards trauma risks universalization, to be sure, but it also makes room for the complex dynamics of cross-identification — white female sexual abuse survivors, to cite one familiar example, reading deeply, unconsciously, into the stories of black women.

[8]Kali Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (England); New York: 1996). Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (Routledge, New York:1999).

[9]Tal, 17.

[10]Tal, 54.

[11]Tal, 59.

[12]ibid.

[13]Tal, 17

[14]Boler, 159, 166.

[15]One brief, but brilliant satire on the amount of energy such teaching requires and the possible outcome of such an expenditure is the following from James Hynes' *The Lecturer's Tale* (Picador USA, New York: 2001):

Stephen Michael Stephens slept standing up [in the elevator], his shoulders lightly brushing the rear wall of the car, his chest rising and falling slowly, his hands clasped before him. As always he was impeccably dressed, in a colorful sweater and beautiful wool trousers and a handsome camel-hair overcoat. But, as always, there were bags under his eyes and a sickly gray under the rich brown of his skin. As the department's only senior African American, he made more money than anyone except Chairperson Pescecane. Tenured already on the basis of his prize-winning, semiautobiographical first book, he was not expected ever to write another. Instead, he was expected to chair the university's annual review of its affirmative action policy, to direct every search for African-American candidates, to mentor junior African-American faculty, to be a role model and counselor for African American graduate and undergraduate students, to teach classes in African-American literature every semester, and generally to explain the ways of black folk to his white colleagues with passion, wit, and intelligence, but without being threatening or inducing guilt. He was expected, in other words, to work like a field hand and be a Credit To His Race, leaving him no time to sleep or have a personal life. He did no work of his own, unless you counted the occasional interviews with black celebrities in *Vanity Fair* and television appearances whenever *Nightline* covered race in America. Consequently he fell into a deep sleep whenever he had the opportunity. (38)

[16]Williams, 26, 28, 202-3, 45, 208 respectively.

[17]Williams, 21.

[18]I have taken many of these recommendations from Lisa Sánchez González's working paper on her own experience with the center, "Killing the Messenger, Misreading the Message: The Expression of Cognition Dissonance and Denial in Student Evaluations of Women of Color Faculty." I am also indebted to this paper for clarifying my thoughts about the difficulties special to teachers who are called upon to embody their subject.

The resources of UT's teaching center can be accessed online at www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/.

[19]Williams, 129.

[20]Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993; 5

[21]Sedgwick, 5.

[22]This was the title of a panel at the April 2002 meeting of the society for Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS). The panel itself did not address the issue, however, but concentrated on the difficulties of teaching ethnic literature at a teaching college where the nearly all-white population would continue to live and work within a 50-mile radius of the school.

[23]"I am made melancholy when I consider that the act of defending the Eurocentric Western posture in literature as not only "universal" but "race-free" may have resulted in lobotomizing that literature, and in diminishing both the art and the artist. Like the surgical removal of legs so that the body can remained enthroned, immobile, static — under house arrest, so to speak"(13). Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28(1):1-34. 1989 Winter. Ann Arbor, MI.

[24]The exceptions were almost too predictable — the three students of color in the class, and one gay white student. I say too predictable because I have had many, many students whose ability to articulate ideas independently from mainstream discourse lagged behind their own self-interest. These four happened to know how to read and analyze, in addition to having a subjectivity that may have made Morrison's arguments more available to them.

[25]As I address in my next section, "Student Stories," space and narrative movement seem to demand that I write about my students as though they were a single mass organism. While it's true that classes do function as a kind of ecosystem, the students hardly responded with one voice. A true description of what happened in the classroom, one that bore witness to individual student testimony, would require a much lengthier, much more detailed description.

[26]This is a subject that Boler is compelled to address at length. See her chapter "A Pedagogy of Discomfort" as a whole, especially 181-2.

[27]This student came from a small town that, in spite of its homogeneity, had been recently been racked by a bitter debate over the two-year college's production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (Theatre Communications Group, New York:1993-1994) a required text in our class. The student gave a lengthy presentation on the violence of the debate

and her own involvement in it, but still felt nostalgic for the supposed cohesion of her former community.

[28]The exceptions to the unspoken taboo on discussing student experiences are striking, though they often serve to prove the rule that such testimony is inherently disempowered. Consider, for example, Judith Fetterly's description of being driven crazy, as an undergraduate, in her classic opening chapter to *The Resisting Reader* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington: 1978) see especially xviii — xxiv, and Alice Kaplan's memoir, *French Lessons* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1993). In both cases (though in different ways) the authors are able to tell their stories because, though they have little power as the protagonists of their narratives, the narratives themselves serve to illustrate how shortsighted and ignorant those who once wielded power over them turned out to be: in Fetterly's case, the missing-the-obvious blindness of those who tried to teach her to "read like a man"; in Kaplan's case the blindness of various senior colleagues and advisors who found her thesis on French Fascist intellectuals and collaboraters irrelevant, only to turn to her once Paul de Man's collaborative journalism was discovered (see especially pg 168).

[29]Boler mentions her own years of experience as a student in her introductory chapter, but never refers back to the experience.

[30]It would be interesting to consider the graduate student tendency (one that hardly abates once one attains the status of professor) to obsessively analyze the personal and professional lives of their teachers, mentors, even the critics and authors from whose work they aspire to learn, in the light of repressed testimony. It is easy enough to dismiss this talk as idle gossip, but the question is where gossip ends and testimony begins. These underground stories insist on the importance of feeling, on the effect of personal and political lives on professional lives and relations and they insist, most of all, on the power of the storytellers to take away power from those they describe and replace that power with human vulnerability.

[31]Tal, ix.

Epilogue

Debts and Homeplaces

Motivations

As I worked on "Ordinary Witnesses," I often encountered people's discomfort with the idea that we are never free of the past – whether it is named *history*, *memory*, or *experience*. When I spoke of the persistence of trauma at conferences, my audiences asked questions about recovery and healing. When my department nominated me for a major fellowship, the graduate advisor asked me to revise my application: The committee, he suggested, would find the "pessimism" of my project "too depressing." The final draft of the application took on a tone of therapeutic progressivism almost wholly alien to the project as it stands – America able to "move forward" as a result of "understanding its past." The advisor's concerns were echoed by those of my own parents, who have consistently, if humorously, expressed their concern for my mental health, and commented on my morbidity, when they can remember what I'm writing about, which my mother, in particular, has great difficulty doing. She reports back to me—in a joke that has now gone on for four years—that whenever she is called upon to explain my project to friends and acquaintances she is met with sympathetic concern: "I tell them what you're writing about and they say, 'Poor thing! She must be so depressed!'" I myself found it difficult to describe my project, when asked about it, as I inevitably was, by politely interested strangers at dozens of parties – the brief, bald statements about trauma a rude interruption of the ongoing polite

conviviality. The word "trauma" itself, almost always misheard—"Drama?" "Trauma" "Oh! Well!"

I have spoken throughout this dissertation of the ways and means that trauma stories are culturally contained, flattened, and repressed, and have spoken of the ways in which the texts I discuss, and others like them, can teach us about the ways in which we are never wholly separate from another's trauma, and can also show us some ethical ways of responding to these connections. But behind the reactions I encountered lurks some slightly different questions, ones that neither recognizes trauma as inescapable, nor accepts engagement with it as a self-evident moral good. Namely: Why think about trauma stories? What's in it for us, who think we are merely bystanders? Or, more radically, why remember? And—even more to the point—what was in it for me, the author of the project and of their discomfort?

For some, remembering will always be tantamount to perpetuating, creating, conjuring up the traumatic event or experience. Thus, my family and friends' suspicion that to engage with trauma one must either be traumatized oneself, or otherwise pathological. (Though I'm never sure whether the assumption is that I'm writing about trauma because I'm depressed, or that I must be depressed because I'm writing about trauma. Probably both.) Indeed, when I describe my project I often scent the assumption on the part of my interlocutors that I am a survivor of sexual abuse, since, as a middle class white woman, I don't appear to be an inheritor of white poverty, Indian genocide or African slavery. On the other hand, those who don't diagnose me often intimate that I am seeking the reflected moral superiority of survivors, listening to the stories of martyrs in order to become a martyr myself. They

fear I am filled with a kind of high moral seriousness whose purpose is to rebuke their blithe, ignorant happiness by calling upon them to confront the unchangeable horror of the world.[1]

On the part of the academics in my anecdotes, the assumption—a common one among the advocates of paying attention to the traumatic past—is that any discussion of trauma must be accompanied by lessons in healing and recovery, and moving forward. (A variation on the old sawhorse about history: "We remember the past to avoid repeating it.") But even in this case, listening to trauma stories is not a good in and of itself, but only a task that leads us on to a good that will allow us to leave them behind, just as reading and thinking about trauma in the classroom is framed by the critics in the previous chapter as a painful but necessary beginning point for heeding a call to action on behalf of social justice.

As I've already said, I don't disagree with the latter assumption. But I am more interested in and compelled by another set of responses I received: delighted surprise, intense identification, and relief. As though freed from the rules of civilized conversation by the mere mention of the subject of trauma, my polite inquirers often launched spontaneously— compulsively?—into their own stories of traumatic encounters and encounters with trauma testimony. Sometimes this testimony felt like a confession, something pressured and shameful. But just as often, it felt expansive and hopeful as well as intense and greedy—a snatched chance at something open, real, and a little wild.

In the wake of what has become known simply as "9/11," I was reminded that to be compelled to become a witness to trauma—to be sure one is in trauma's vicinity

without being traumatized oneself—can be a heretical relief. Trauma's interruption allows its witnesses, finally, and with total impunity, to call it all off, to stop the world, to both feel our smallness and fragility, and to test our powers. Sometimes we flock to the site of an emergency hoping, not for a vulgar thrill, but for the relief from fragmentation, irresolution and passivity that only the sense of immediate contact with the undeniable important can give us. It's not a pure or purely moral pleasure – it depends, of course, on the muffled daily safety of what we like to think are ordinary lives. It is a pleasure linked as much to war as it is to the fireman's wild ride to the burning building. It is one of the secrets of heroism, and it is the solace of faith.[2]

It was my own variation of these two kinds of relief that drew me to trauma work, a relief that first surprised me, then drew me in and became necessary to my life, even when I wished I could leave it behind. It began, or so I thought before writing this dissertation, with my work at a psychiatric hospital, where I worked for two years as an un-degreed creative arts therapist (my original job as a creative writing teacher had expanded as other therapists left, or burned out). My friends and family often asked how I could stand my work, which must be so depressing. They seemed to imagine the hospital as a single wave of unimaginable emotional intensity, as though to work in the vicinity of trauma was to be caught up in one long epicentric traumatic event. But, with the exception of those patients who were actively psychotic or suicidal, the people I met who were caught in trauma's grip continued to live everyday lives. They cracked jokes and got peeved, and were often bored. They relaxed and watched T.V., ate the bad hospital food, and walked about, however painfully, in the bodies that had so often betrayed them, or been assaulted. They gave

me a glimpse of the trauma effect that Dorothy Allison tried to describe: *the way everyday life is still everyday life even when you are being beaten and raped*.

To dwell among the broken, the mad, the beaten, my friends thought, must be a great burden. But what I felt was relief: for did I not dwell among the broken, the mad and the beaten everyday in silence? (I mean this quite literally: the hospital was in my small hometown, and it was not unusual for the distressed acquaintance I met at a party on Friday night to be waiting in the admittance room on Monday morning.) The discourse and discipline of the hospital was imperfect (and often worse), but it was, all the same, a discourse. There in the hospital, the ghosts that made themselves felt in the awkward pauses of everyday life came into the light of day. There they were courted, teased out, scrutinized, massaged, framed and reflected. Their haunting stories were flattened and cut short by a universal language insufficient to describe them, a language shaped as much by concerns about malpractice litigation, managed health care, and empiricism as by concerns about the human heart. (It was this language I combated with literature, my faith in it renewed.) But even when they were cut short the ghost stories were there, all the same. And there I was, among a small but important circle of friends and allies, all of us ghost-trackers in our own ways.

Coming upon the artwork of Gary Simmons, Avery Gordon writes:

> ...I thought I had found a fellow traveler, someone interested in the kinds of ghostly presences and absences that had preoccupied me, someone who was casting out a story line from the depth of the wall, someone who was seeing things when there didn't seem to be anything there. Since seeing what hardly anyone can see is a tell-tale sign of lunacy in our official culture, I was excited, as I always am, about the possibility of shared company; about the possibility that when someone shouted, 'Ghosts in the House!', one more person would call back, 'Over Here!'[3]

Whenever I have gotten lost amidst the intricacies of the various arguments to be made about the rich material I have gathered for this project, it is this sense I have returned to — the relief of finally being able to engage directly with the pain I'd sensed for so long, my frustration that there was not a more delicate, a more ethical, way of doing so, and the deep satisfaction of finding out that I was not the only one who felt haunted by things that were at once violently, intrusively present, and not quite there at all.

Homeplaces

Throughout this project I have found that *memory*, *history*, *experience*, and *the past*, are deeply imbricated with *home* for both the authors I have read, and my own attempts to expand the definition of trauma. The utopic resonance of *home* gestures toward the impossibility of declaring ourselves free from the past, or of considering such freedom desirable**.** When we tell trauma stories, read them, or teach them, *home* is on the line in many different ways, including our sense of safety and comfort, the communities we come from and the fragile new ones we create, our flesh and blood parents and our infantile fantasies about them, and the way the *unheimlich*—the uncanny, literally un-homely forces collected in trauma so often play their gothic trick of turning up at the center of our strongholds, our "safe spaces." It is the force of home that compels me to resist the notion that trauma exists only to be left behind: trauma may loosen its grip on the individual who seeks healing, but as a cultural force and discourse trauma is not to be "gotten over" or "worked through" any more than our dead are to be forgotten, or our memories of home and childhood forever put

away. And if, as I have suggested throughout this project, trauma is not just an event, but a pervasive set of effects that create a field, or a (national) landscape in which we are all standing, the project of witnessing need not take place through the pain of Others, who live beyond the pale outside the hearth, but can begin wherever we are standing, including the most haunted places in our own lives that are so often synonymous with home.

One model for this kind of witnessing, a model that was always in the back of my mind as I wrote, is Minnie Bruce Pratt's essay, "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart."[4] Published in 1984 as part of the joint project, *Yours in Struggle*, with essays by Barbara Smith and Elly Bulkin on race and anti-semitism, Pratt's essay was written in the heat of urgent and newly apparent (though old) rifts in the Women's Movement around race, class, and sexuality of the previous five years typified by the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back* and the Barnard Conference on Sexuality. "Skin, Blood, Heart" addresses these rifts by moving simultaneously through the personal and the historical, bringing Pratt's new critical awareness to the stuff of her everyday life, and of her home and family: the streets she walks on to get around in Washington D.C., her neighborhood, the geography and demography of her hometown, chance conversations with near-strangers, and sudden strangeness in her intimate talks. Like the other texts I have read, the essay is a collection of stories/examples. These focus on the events that moved Pratt, willingly and/or forcibly, from one homeplace to another: her white, Southern, Christian girlhood; her life as a young, pregnant wife and student in the North Carolina's military research triangle; her coming to

consciousness as a feminist; her first lesbian lover; her subsequent divorce, in which she loses her right to see her children; and her current work as a lesbian activist.[5]

Pratt's essay returns again and again to the notion of a homeplace—whether identity, love, or geography—that is made strange and uninhabitable when the illusion of safety gives way to the felt strictures of a traumatic contract: the daughter, wife, mother, feminist, lesbian allowed to behave only a certain way, to partake of identity and community only within recognizable and clearly drawn bounds. Ultimately, Pratt rejects as romantic the idea that home and safety are synonymous, and that a homeplace must be stable and secure—ideas well worth returning to in the current political moment of "homeland security." But at the same time, Pratt does not dismiss the hope and longing for a homeplace, and the terror of seeming to undo oneself what is already under attack from the outside. Writing about the difficult work of facing up to the traumatic contracts that bounded the tiny, precious cultural space that feminist communities had made for themselves, Pratt figures this terror as the fear of homelessness:

> What if I say, I need this to change? Will I next be unwelcome *here*? Then comes the fear of nowhere to go: no old home with family: no new one with women like ourselves: and no place to be expected with folks who have been systematically excluded by ours. And with our fear comes the doubt: Can I maintain my principles against my need for the love and presence of others like myself? It is lonely to be separated from others because of injustice, but it is also lonely to break with our own in opposition to that injustice. (50)

The Fear of No Home, of sometimes quite literally estranging themselves from our parents, friends and home communities, is what we ask our students and ourselves to face when we face the traumatic contracts that structure our lives. But what brings us to this point is not necessarily moral righteousness, nor even our own trauma, but the

kind of impasse of love I describe Allison, Alexie and Williams as facing—a psychic moment when beloved people and places are irrevocably bound together with traumatic history.

The place and family of Pratt's birth and childhood, and her love for and estrangement from them, runs throughout "Skin, Blood, Heart." Indeed, though for most of the essay her father is figured as a representative of the hidden violence of white patriarchy in her Southern girlhood, the essay can be read as an elegy for him, and the complex legacy of all he represented for Pratt. In her final anecdote about him, Pratt links her father intimately with the remembered landscape of her childhood, and the sense of *home* she longs for, before, poignantly, he disappears from the living world in a parentheses:

> It was a place I had been to with my father, who took me to the woods, not to hunt (for he was not a hunter) but to walk, he with a double-bladed ax that he raised to trim dead branches, with his silence except to name the trees (black-jack oak, sweet bay) and to say how to step (high over logs where copperheads liked to rest cool): his silence that may have been his prayer to the trees that he counted on weekdays at the sawmill as dead board feet (but he is dead now, and I will never know what went on in his mind: his silence that taught me to listen to the life rushing through the veins of the animal world). (25)

In this brief, rich portrait, Pratt's father is both gentle teacher and exploiter, both articulate and silent, both held close and beyond her reach. There are no easy villains here, nor any easy ways back to—or away from—Pratt's remembered childhood pastoral, and her love for her father. Its mood is elegiac not only because it is a memory called up in the face of his death, but because Pratt mourns here both her own missed chance at intimacy (*I will never know what went on in his mind…)* and her sadness at what she imagines was her father's life and work: a man for whom trees

were nameable, animated, and also *dead board feet* counted for money—the trees and his own death separated only by that fragile parenthesis.

Pratt's essay circles around and outward from the mood of this brief moment, without necessarily referring back to it. It permeates the motivation and shape of her essay in a way that is similar, I imagine, to what Freud may have seen in his own work, when, writing the preface to the second edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he discovered to his surprise, that he, too, had written an elegy for his father:

> …this book has a further subjective significance for me personally—a significance which I only grasped after I had completed it. It was, I found, a portion of my own self-analysis, my reaction to my father's death—that is to say, to the most important event, the most poignant loss, of a man's life. Having discovered that this was so, I felt unable to obliterate the traces of the experience.[6]

Whether Freud's poignant inability *to obliterate the traces* means he is actively unwilling to erase his father's presence, that he sees the amount of revision and editing needed for such a task as impossible to carry out, or that he suspects the same unconscious processes that created his father's presence in the first place would outwit him in the end is unclear. What is clear is that the traces are there: mourning remains.[7]

I began to grasp the story of my own homeplace and its significance to this project only as I completed my writing and looked at the path I had taken from the field of trauma studies, to the doorstep of ethnic and race studies, guided always, along the way, by the insights of feminist and queer studies. Then I saw that my need to engage with trauma stories stemmed not only from a desire to bear witness to what I first encountered in the psychiatric hospital, but from the haunting absences in my

own familial home, a home exquisitely shaped by the violent project of assimilation and upward class mobility.

It is a project deeply veiled by its quotidian nature. It and its violence become tangible only when they flash up in moments of danger that cast new light on the everyday. For example: When my maternal grandmother died, my mother tried to contact my great-uncles, but was unsure whether they were dead or alive. It turned out that they were both dead. One had died the year before, the other three months previous. To find this out, my mother had to contact a first cousin she hadn't spoken to in over 20 years (and hasn't spoken to since), not from some identifiable crisis, but out of a not-so-simple neglect.

My parents currently live in a large, very beautiful house that they designed themselves. The house is filled with folk art objects, mostly collected by my mother. Many of them are very old and come from very far away, and all of them have stories: the elaborately painted front doors, originally part of a rich Moroccan man's house, shipped to the States after many translated faxes and comedies of error; the beautiful, tall chair of polished wood from Africa, made from salvaged railroad ties, now sitting in front of the picture window with the fabulous view; the ancient fragment of a carved-flower lintel from a Shanghai doorway picked up by my father on a business trip for the multi-national he now heads (he went to business school when my mother became pregnant with me, leaving his dissertation on the Algerian war of independence unfinished) now framing the family room fireplace. And so on.

Into the silence and absence of homeplaces denied rush expensive, storied, (post)colonial objects from the past. Inanimate things often speak more easily than the

silenced dead. It is ordinary, this half-story about money and silence, even though the details are unique, and therefore important.

I grew up, and still live, encircled by my parents' deep love, their vibrant intelligence and humor, an impossible, happy childhood, and an economic security that rests on the traumatic contracts of their forgetting. My writing is made possible by the money whose making may or may not have required this forgetting, but that almost certainly facilitated and ensured its continuance, every dollar earned and spent another reason not to look back, another reason to be sure the decision to move on and to forget was the right one, or the only one.

If melancholia can be characterized not only by a refusal to let go of what is lost, *a loved person...one's country, liberty, an ideal and so on*,[8] but by a weariness at the difficulty of convincing oneself and others that anything has disappeared to begin with, my family and their friends were right: I am often depressed, and that depression has a great deal to do with my trauma work, though not quite in the way they may have thought.

Debts

At twenty-one, a year after I had recovered from the worst of what had been diagnosed as clinical depression, I didn't know any of this (I have barely begun to know it now). I only knew that every time I returned to what I thought of, very much in the manner of an earnest young woman who had recently discovered feminism and Emily Dickinson, as "my father's house," it felt more muffled, closed off, harder to get away from. Not simply silent, but actively silencing. I had also begun to feel a

tremendous, if deeply inarticulate sense of debt that increased with my increasing awareness of my own privilege. Not, and I want to be clear about this, not guilt, but a feeling of having to do something important with the advantages I had been given. I wanted, like so many young people, to "do *something*," as Pratt says, quoting from Lillian Smith, to overcome the "'basic ambivalence of feelings," by which we move through our way of life 'like some half-dead thing, doing as little harm (and as little good) as possible, playing around the edges of great life issues'" (46-47).

Even as this feeling made me deeply suspicious of intellectuality and literature, I was passionately engaged in reading and thinking about the work of those who would eventually lead me to this project. They were, not coincidentally, many of the women with whom Pratt and her cohorts (who included Dorothy Allison) had been talking, writing and reading: Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, the women collected in *The Bridge Called My Back*, and then, somewhat later, Leslie Marmon Silko, Louise Erdrich, Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison just to begin the list. I discovered many of these authors, especially the queer ones, on my own, catching hold of a poem or an excerpt in an anthology and then ordering the books by mail.

I had started with the poets of a slightly earlier moment in women's literary history, including Sylvia Plath and Ann Sexton, and then gone looking for an answer to their cramped, foreshortened lives. In spite (or because?) of the fact that I am heterosexual, I found it first in lesbian words and worlds, reading Grahn's queer cultural history *Another Mother Tongue* downstairs in my childhood bedroom, and then going out into my small, conservative hometown of Boise, Idaho and suddenly

seeing the queer worlds and people who had always been there, and would become my new homeplaces when I returned to Boise (but not to my father's house) after college.[9] Much later, repeating the historical trajectory of the women's movement in my own small way, I would begin to recognize Boise's stifling whiteness, and the intricacies of its small town class structure and to connect these, slowly, slowly, to my work at the psychiatric hospital, and as a journalist at our new alternative weekly newspaper, and to the ideas in my head that would one day become this project.

It may seem like it would have been easier, even healthier, to move on and away as my parents had done before me, not to speak of them here. But there was no way I could make the work of the authors above my life-line and *not* go back—geographically, intellectually, emotionally. For though the lives they record are radically different from my own and from each other, what they all have in common, along with Allison, Alexie and Williams the stubborn urge to recover their homeplaces, to dwell in, rather than abandon or pathologize their particular impasses of love. If there is a "lesson" in the trauma stories I have read, it is not about facing up to the past so we can move forward, but about learning how to return in relative safety to the places that are often the sources of our deepest compulsions. It is a lesson not in learning how to get over trauma, but in how to continue living with it, and even to continue loving oneself and others through it.

I wrote "Ordinary Witnesses" to formulate a method, a way of beginning to repay my unpayable debt to the literature—and the lives— that have made my life as it stands possible. I was looking for a way to bear witness to radical homework already accomplished. If this project has turned its face rather stubbornly to other disciplines,

to questions both larger and more intimate than a professional intervention in the field of American literature, to voices and lives far beyond my own voice and life, it is my sense of debt, and of gratitude, that has fueled its boldness, its earnestness, and its ambition. And it is this debt, and this gratitude that moves me, finally, to claim the value of my own ordinary witnessing.

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[1] This kind of high seriousness is not unrelated to the ethic of paranoia, the "strong theory," that Eve Sedgwick outlines in her introduction to *Novel Gazing*, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You" (Duke UP, 1992). I see my project as moving back and forth between this paranoia, and what Sedgwick terms the "weak theory" of reparative reading, which, she exemplifies with the practice of "unhurried, undefensive, theoretically galvanized…close reading," and the possibility of surprise (even when the surprise is sometimes bad). See especially 6-8, 13-14, and 23.

[2] Many professional trauma workers have remarked on this pleasure and its ethical dubiousness. Human rights workers, doctors and journalists, especially, who travel from trauma site to trauma site are aware of their own possession by the need for absolute involvement.

[3]Avery Gordon, "Making Pictures of Ghosts: The Art of Gary Simmons," *Social Identities,* Volume 5, Number 1, 1999.

[4] Minnie Bruce Pratt, "Identity: Skin, Blood, Heart," collected in *Yours in Struggle*, eds. Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Barbara Smith, Firebrand Books: Ithaca, New York, 1988 (originally published by Long Haul Press, 1984). All further quotes are from this edition and are cited in the text.

[5] Though my reading of Pratt spins off in a different direction, I am indebted to Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty's 1985 essay "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do With It?" (collected in Martin's *Femininity Played Straight*, Routledge: New York, 1996), especially their initial characterization of Pratt's essay, 168-170.

[6]Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, Avon

Books: New York 1965 (xxvi).

[7]I am deliberately echoing the phrase "mourning remains" from editors David Eng and David Kazanjian's introduction to *Loss*: *The Politics of Mourning* (University of California Press, 2003) a collection that takes up the persistence of mourning, loss and trauma in ways that both support my own project's explorations, and point toward the direction of its expansion and revision.

[8] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 243. I am indebted to David Eng and Shinhee Han's "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia" (collected in *Loss*) for connecting my thoughts on the violence of assimilation to melancholia. Eng and Han are specifically concerned with the struggles of the Asian American college students they have encountered and the specificity of their essay is well worth preserving. I hope to develop this rather oblique gloss in future projects.

[9]My particular investments in queer cultures, particularly lesbian ones, are, as they say, a whole other story, one that I have already planned to investigate in a future project tentatively titled *Dyke Envy*.

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